



Good As Hell

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Description: Prince Hassan Al Rasheed

Yesterday, I found out I was a father.

Today, I kidnapped the biggest star in the world because she thought to keep my son from me.

Soon she will learn there is no where she can run from me.

I gave her one night. One.

Now, I'm taking her forever.

Lyric is an icon. The most loved and loathed artist of her time.

Headline grabbing for more than a decade with her notorious affairs and midnight album drops.

Now she's grabbing the biggest headline of all...

KIDNAPPED.

While the world searches, I play.

She thought to take what was mine.

Keep my heir hidden away from his legacy

She's lucky I'm not taking her life in return.

Only the lush curves of her body.

I will bend the curvy little superstar. Ruin her. Break her.

Never my queen.

No, the biggest star on the planet won't have my heart.

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Prologue

HOW THE END OF ONE STORY CAN BE THE START OF SOMETHING
AMAZIING

LYRIC

“You don’t have to do this. My mom and dad will help.”

I nod, unable to meet Delightful’s somber gaze.

“I can’t be pregnant going on tour with FADE and Ghadi in two months’ time, DiDi.”
I look away from the pleading in her eyes to my jean clad thighs. Jeans that are already tight against my belly. I barely got them on. Panic rushes up my spine right then, like nothing I’ve ever experienced except what for happened to get me in this situation.

I push the feeling down, facing her squarely with the determination I’ve felt since FADE asked me to come on tour with him and his wonderkin brother after they got their big record deal.

“You know I have to get out of here. Chances like this won’t come again.”
Unbuckling my seatbelt, I unlock the door. I’d love not having to continue this conversation anymore. I don’t need anyone trying to change my mind.

Delightful is my best friend aside from my sisters, but they are young too young to tell about what’s going on. I tell hereverything. Only I know I can never tell her the

truth about this baby I'm not keeping — her brother's Justice baby, the only thing left of him after he was killed a little over a month ago.

“You don't have to come in with me. I-I never should have asked you to come.” My throat is tight. I feel anxious. It's not that I'm having second thoughts — no, never that. I just want to be done with this thing growing in me. Done with this life. My family, this city. All of it.

“No,” she says, quickly unbuckling her seatbelt and scooting over and out of the car. She just got her license. Her parents gave her the car that would have been Justice's if he lived.

We both get out of the car and head towards The All Women's Health Clinic. With every step closer to the double doors, I feel like a weight has been lifted. Now my life can finally start.

Chapter One

DISLIKE AT FIRST SIGHT

LYRIC

“Well, look who the cat dragged in.” A huge grin spreads across my face as Delightful turns to smile my way. All the worry melts from her beautiful face as I walk closer to where she's standing at the edge of the room. She's hiding from FADE after their bad and very public break-up a few months ago.

“Wow, Lyric, you look amazing as usual.” She gives an approving nod at my outfit.

“I know, right?” Preening like the superstar I am, I turn slowly so she and Flower —FADE's younger sister and CFO of their company, can get a gander of my outfit,

which was sure to be on every fashion blog come tomorrow.

It seems my bestie, and I both decided on jumpsuits, my pants are tied like harem pants and every seam has crystal embellishments.

My skin sparkles with diamond dust that accentuates my dark hues. Along with every dip and curve of my deliciouslyplump body. I always embrace my curves and sex positivity. I know I'm both loved and reviled for my supposed frankness about my life and how I portray it in my art so unapologetically.

Delightful tells me Justice would have been proud of the woman the girl he'd loved since six grade has become. He would have cheered me on with unrestrained pride. I know it and that feeling has carried me for so long. The loneliness I feel sometimes is only alleviated by the thoughts of how far I came alone and why I rather be by myself that settle for less than what he so freely gave.

When I finish my turn, we all giggle at my antics. So many people are so set on never having fun and being stuck up all the time. Not me. After surviving the tragedy of life as a child, I vowed that I would never be made to feel like that again and I would live a life of joy and give as much of that to others as possible.

"Splendid," Flower smiles, her eyes glowing with warmth. "I think FADE is saving the seat beside him for you." She nods toward the center of the second row.

I can't help but notice how Delightful also follows the direction of Flower's head. Her gaze greedily eating up the tall figure because even from here you can see just how tall he is over some of those assembled.

"I need food first." I say, moving past them to the bounty set before us.

"You better hurry. The movie starts in five minutes." Flower warns, looking at her

watch.

I hurry over and pile the plate with an assortment of goodies. All gourmet food made to look like fast food. When they just could have had a chain cater it. I mean, the Hot Chicken and burger sliders could have been mom and pop for all I care. Way less pretentious and probably tastes better. That's one thing I never like about fame. The food is bland. Give me Eagles in Birmingham any day over five-star restaurants in Beverly Hills any day of the week.

When I get to the row I'm supposed to be sitting on, I turn to face the people sitting so I'm not putting the full splendidness of my bottom in their face. Though the seating is stadium like it's almost like they misjudged the leg room, or is everyone on this row tall as hell?

Kris "The Kronic" Kyrikos is sitting with Miracle right at the end and then further down are FADE's parents —both tall people, then the Al Rasheed brothers Sadiq and Hassan. They are identical twins, Lovie-Belle waves sandwiched between them though she leans more towards one than the other. They are both gorgeous. Coldly gorgeous with a hint a severity edging their mouths.

"There she is." FADE waves me closer, indicating I should sit in the seat between him and the twin to the left of Lovie-Belle.

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“I’m glad you came,” he says the minute I take my seat.

“I am too, but this seat should be for DiDi,” I tell him, nudging his side with an elbow a little. We both turn to look at the lone figure standing on the far wall.

“You know your ass is wrong for not allowing her to sit with everyone up here.” I give him a little pinch for emphasis.

“Ow, man,” he grumbles. “She didn’t even say she wanted to come until last night. It was last minute as hell.”

“You know that girl wanted to come to the movie she wrote. You be on some weird shit sometimes, I swear.” I fuss at him in low tones. I’m one of the few people in this world who’s not afraid to speak my mind to the billionaire rap mogul. He values that, but it still doesn’t stop the sharp look he casts my way.

“Hm, since when have you become a relationship expert? You’re on your what? Twentieth or thirtieth fake relationship. When the last one was caught with two guys, that should have been enough for you to slow your roll.” Comes the low-key scathing clap back.

“Ow,” he says again when I elbow him hard in his ribs.

“You’re lucky I love your lil ass. Don’t do that shit again, man,” he mutters. Taking a handful of my gourmet caramel corn.

“Anyway.” I sigh, rolling my eyes.

“Have some? Um, I’m sorry I don’t know if you’re Sadiq or Hassan,” I say sheepishly to the twin to my right, offering my tray of food to him.

“No thanks, and it’s the latter.” Comes a deep baritone draped in midnight. It’s then when I look up into the hazel green of his eyes that my breath catches.

He gives me an impersonal, unimpressed sweep of his gaze. In that moment I feel tried, found wanting and convicted with one dismissive sweep of those long lashes.

He turns his face from me, then at something Lovie-Belle whispers to him. Warm tones reach my ears but the change in how he treats her is not lost on me.

Making sure I’m not touching him in the least I keep my food in a little cocoon relenting when FADE reaches over for more, happy I’m sharing my goodies with him.

I don’t relax — not when the movie starts, not when songs play that I wrote and recorded specifically for the soundtrack. I don’t think I breathe until the credits scroll.

Applause surrounds us in a cloak of love. I know it’s mostly industry people and those close with FADE, but I can’t help feeling proud of the work we did here, celebrating his legacy and setting the record straight on his involvement with Justice’s death.

Still, I can’t escape the chill coming off the man next to me. He’s holding his body as if touching me would make him combust, as if I’m the lowest trash. He turns more fully to Lovie-Belle, fully icing me out.

As much as I wanted to enjoy this moment with one of my best and oldest friends. I can’t. I haven’t felt so low since before I left home.

“The press is going to have some questions,” FADE tells me after what seems like endless ovations.

We head out the seating of the screening area into the auditorium to the main stage is where the press gathered pack as tight as vultures over a carcass.

“Hey? You good?” No one reads me better than him, except maybe DiDi and his brother, Ghadi. The concern in his voice eradicates the ruthlessness of his set down earlier now only genuine love and concern are etched on his face.

“I’m great.” Nodding for emphasis because the mean ass motherfucker Hassan is still here, though we are all standing now. I can feel his presence right behind me. I will not be giving him the satisfaction of thinking he hurt my feelings. The thing I know for sure about the person he presented to me a little over two hours ago at the beginning of the movie is they get off on making people feel small — especially women. Powerful women like me who need men for nothing but eye candy and the occasional orgasm are a threat to men like him. Asshole gonna asshole.

“Aight.” FADE looks at me with skepticism, dragging the word out to an infinity.

“Even if I’m not, I am. Got that?” I demand as he tucks me under his arm.

“Yeah, but what happened? One minute you were laying into me about my girl, then you started looking all sad. I don’t like that.” He presses a kiss on the crown of my head.

“Nah, I’m good.” My words are muffled by the near headlock he has me in as we make our way down to the stage of the auditorium to the chairs to answer the questions to the press.

“Okay, let’s do this.” He tells me immediately, turning his charisma on to with a

thousand-watt-smile for the masses, offering his arm to me like a perfect gentleman helping me to the stage.

No sooner than we are seated are we fielding questions from everything about the movie to production.

I find it hilarious since FADE and I had the least to do with the movie. That's the thing about being two of the biggest stars in the world. Our names are what sell. FADE does his part, giving all the questions to Lovie-Belle, Delightful, the Al Rasheed brothers and the actors who play the roles of FADE, Ghad and me in the movie.

“Tell us, Lyric, you have the reputation as an exacting perfectionist. Are the rumors true that you gave the team fits about how you were being portrayed?”

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“I will never apologize for wanting to give the best possible product to my fans, but in order to do that, you have to know when to step back and let people who are experts in their field take the lead. I trust Lovie-Belle and Delightful’s vision, and I know they trust the Al Rasheeds. I for one, am very happy and grateful for the care they took with the entire project.” My answer is heartfelt, and it is true. Not that I didn’t know this question was coming. There have been whispers for months I was causing problems. For the life of me, I couldn’t figure out where it stemmed from. Yet, I know after nearly two decades in the entertainment business, if you’re explaining, you’re losing the narrative.

Having nothing to do with the movie other than turn in the song assignments as FADE gave them to me or rework arrangements with Ghad. I had nothing to do with the film. I wonder if that is why Hassan had such a negative reaction towards me earlier?

“I see.” The reported hedges looking around for confirmation from the rest of the cast and lasering on Lovie-Belle for confirmation.

“Lyric was never on the set and did everything we asked. Really Amy, you know better than to heed meritless gossip in this town.” Lovie-Belle titters like the woman is being absurd.

“But so many rumors?—”

“Enough.” A hard command comes from where the Al Rasheeds are sitting among the audience in the front row. “Move on.” The clipped tone brokes no argument. There is a tense moment in which I try and fail not to meet the eyes of the man who

came to my rescue.

He looks aggrieved to have even done it. He catches my gaze and I'm locked in like prey in a scope. Hassan looks even more aggravated with me, as if I brought this on myself.

Heat rushes to my face and I'm ever so thankful for my glam squad for perfecting my make-up to the degree that none of the embarrassing flush shines through.

I sit up straighter as if he's commanded me too. I look straight ahead like I'm back at choir rehearsal at my home church, First Baptist Ensley in Alabama.

For the rest of the interview, I do my best not to look at the man who judged me then came to my defense only to look at me again like I was the biggest problem. I don't like how he's making me so off kilter.

My competitive spirit has me wanting to win him over. I know this is my strength as well as a weakness — I've always been able to prove my doubters wrong with either my hard work or my personality. Yet something tells me Hassan Al Rasheed never going to like me.

The pulse of the music at the after party strums through my veins. I'm on my second Remi Martin 1738, neat, so I feel mighty fine right now, like my grams used to say before she passed.

FADE and Delightful disappeared over an hour ago. I'm glad that I secured one of the penthouse suits of the five star Waldorf Astoria. I didn't want to travel back to my place in Malibu since I've put it up for sale and the realtor has so many showings with various brokers. I love that house. It's served its purpose, but I decided after this tour that's due to kick-off in a couple of months I was going to find another place to stay. My plan is to have my sisters come live with me with never panned out. And my

Malibu mansion where I'd planned every day to be like a spa day for Kadence, Harmony, Song and me never is way too big and lonely for just little curvy ol' me.

Rob figured if he could keep them under his thumb, he'd have some control over me. And to an extent he's right — I send them money, keep up their lifestyle. since he rules everything mom and my sisters do with an iron fist, I can only comply. Boiling angry at myself for still letting that troll get to me makes my tummy twist into knots. Pure evil does not come close to defining that monster.

Justice's dad, Pastor Carrington and Ms. Grace, his wife, told me to never let hatred rule me and I have tried. Lord knows I have, but if there is one thing I want to do is kill that motherfucker. Him, and his weak ass wife, my mother. She should have left his ass a long time ago — especially when I made it. But no, she was too concerned with what people would say.

“Um, that's my song.” I say to Fifi by bestie, my everything as soon as the strands of Baddie hit my ears.

“That's literally your song, hoe.” She fake sneers down at me as I toss back the remains of the liquor and make my way to the dance floor.

She follows because how can she not? I know we make a pair ridiculous or gorgeous. We have been called it all. Me, a shortie in my white jumper hitting all my curves and Fifi that I often shorten to just Fi, also formally known as Felix, her dead name before she transitioned is a nearly six-foot tall light-skinned beauty with a pixie blond body-waved hair. Her tall, lithe form is the perfect opposite to my short curves.

The remix of the song I made especially for the movie drives us into the newly choreographed piece we've been practicing for my upcoming world tour.

“Oh, get it girl,” Fifi cheers as I drop low into a move, ignoring the camera flashes as

we dance together like to two baddies that we are.

We gyrate and twirl like we have a million times before, and for the first time that night, I allow myself to feel genuine joy. Freedom is its own aphrodisiac and has been my only one for as long as I can remember. Having your choices taken when you are too young to know better or be able to protect yourself makes it so. I revel in the power I hold at being at the top of my game and enjoying with Fi always makes me happy.

No longer do I dwell on the haughty disdain of Hassan Al-Rasheed's mean ass.

One song turns into two, but then I feel like I need to get my second wind.

"I'm not eighteen anymore." I remind Fifi.

She quirks a mercurial eye. "You're not twenty either."

"You ain't either." Sticking my tongue out at her, I go back over to the table where my security is standing.

"Dang, my feet hurt." Fifi mumbles as we sit back down. Eyeing her as she sneaks a hand under the table to rub her bruised toes, I roll my eyes. "That's what you get for wearing those high ass heels all the time. Then having the nerve to try to dance in them."

"Well, everyone can't be a sneaker head like you." She scoffs. "You can get away with it. I'd be looking like Big Bird."

"Well," Leaning back, I give her a critical eye. "The blond hair ain't helping."

She gives me a stunned look for all of two seconds when we both fall out laughing.

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We laugh so hard tears crowd the corners of my eyes.

“Oh my goodness.” Grabbing a tissue from her proffered hand, I dab the corners of my eyes.

“Wow, that was cold-blooded.” She shakes her head. Just as she does, my gaze skims past her to the tall figure standing on the opposite side of the room. He’s standing in an alcove alone, sipping a clear liquid.

None of that is surprising. What has the breath arrested in my chest is the fact that he’s looking at me. Not just that he’s looking at me, but the way he’s looking at me.

The green topaz gaze of Hassan Al-Rasheed smolders as he takes me in across the room.

“What, or rather, who are you looking at?” Fifi swivels to look.

“No,” I snap, barely noticing the frown puckering on her flawlessly made-up face.

“Don’t look.” I still can’t take my eyes off him, even as it’s more than clear to him I’m talking about him.

“It’s Hassan,” I say, barely moving my lips, but the quirk of his brow lets me know he read my lips.

I can’t stop the curl of a smirk that gives me away.

“Nooo, I thought you said he was mean.” Grabbing her neck, she gasps, her long lashes adding to the drama of her roundineyes. “He’s so mean. Fi.” She adds in a baby voice with a pout to boot.

“He was,” I concede, watching as he finishes the drink and handing it to a passing server.

His eyes never leave mine. Slipping one hand in his suit pocket, he takes out what looks like a credit card. A server materializes out of nowhere. He speaks to the man, his eyes still steady on me. With a brief nod, the man disappears. He looks at me seemingly forever.

My heart races. I don’t understand what’s happening. He looks positively feral. Why does that make parts of me that have long lay dormant awaken with a ferocity I haven’t felt since I lost the love of my life — a passion I never got to experience despite the love we shared? I felt like I was too tainted and Justice thought ironically that I was too pure.

“Uh-uh, babe, he ain’t the one.” I barely hear Fi’s ferocious whisper as I watch him slice me with one long, lingering look before he pivots and leaves without a backward look.

I sit back, disappointment bracketing me like a deluge on a hot summer day in Birmingham. Only it’s nowhere near as comforting. Only leaves the ick you feel when hot, steamy clothes cling to you as you bake in the sweltering heat of summer sun.

“He left.” I raise my gaze to her worried one. Being one of the four people who knows my story, she’s fiercely protective of me. Maybe too much sometimes.

He’s not worth it,” she tells me with a steel resolve in her tone, letting me know she’ll

fight me on this if need be.

“Babe, you say that about everyone with your cock blocking tail.” I scoff, pulling the near empty Remy towards me but having no desire to drain the rest of the drink.

“Well, we both know I ain’t blocking no cocks, hunnie.” I can’t help breaking into a little giggle at her naughty words.

“You ain’t never lied,” I tell her.

“He’s not a terrible choice.” Slowly turning the glass in slow revolutions, I wonder at his mercurial behavior. A man blowing hot and cold with me is unusual. Most can’t wait to tell the lie about me sexually. There’s no doubt he’s heard about my escapades. I know more than one guy who’s put off by my so-called active sex life, even the NBA player who himself has a notorious reputation for his love life. When we dated one time after I’d set him on a merry chase of conquest, he was so preoccupied with those he thought were my many ex-lovers. He got dumped without even a kiss, bless his heart. I’m too grown to baby men. I don’t speak about my past. No one deserves my story until they have proven themselves worthy of my trust. I know from loving Justice that when I love, I love hard. Lose myself completely in the glow of their adoration. I wanted to breathe Justice in and will never forgive myself for being so close, only to lose it all. Loving me back then cost him his life as much as his mom’s activism.

“His loss.” I tip my glass to my bestie.

“Damn straight.” Glasses clink. I drink down the rest of my Remy, ignoring the twinge of disappointment.

“Excuse me.” Turning, I look into the eyes of the same server Hassan spoke to earlier.

He holds a silver tray in my direction with a black card placed on a linen napkin.

I barely hear Fi scoff, “I know you fucking lying,”

Chapter Two

JAMEELA MEANS BEAUTIFUL

LYRIC

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~The Penthouse~

Just the scrolled word on the black card with a code on the back. I waited until an hour after I left Fifi in her room because I knew that she was going to argue with me the entire time. The way she was mugging me the whole time after the server dropped off that card you would have thought I was exactly the slag tabloids made me out to be. The silent but loud “I’m totally judging you and you better not,” seared me for the full ten minutes it took me to convince her I wasn’t going to go hook up with the prince.

Stepping into the elevator, I press the floor to the penthouse suite, then enter the code. My heart hammers as the door closes, but I’m not deterred there is something about the filthy sweet promise in his gaze that has me wanting to know if I can make him shatter the same way his earlier dismissal made me pause.

One thing about me is I love a challenge and Hassan Al Rasheed has proven to be one I can’t resist.

My reputation as being as current highest grossing singer in the world does nothing to stop the smears. Being a woman who is sex positive and wants young women to lean into their power and body autonomy always has its critics. Mostly tight mouthed women and even tighter sphincter men but I don’t let that deter me.

I long ago stopped being concerned about what people think. I own every part of me and it’s made me damn near a billion dollars. If I can secure this deal with a leading spirits company, I will be well only way.

My five-year plan hinges on me generating enough buzz to secure my future with Le Bonne Champagne. I'd heard the premium beverage company was in financial straights because of the heirs fighting over control needed a spokesperson and a serious rebrand. No, I want a partnership. After my tour I will be ready to go all in. They were prime for the picking. I heard that two of the brothers were actively looking for someone to help them do a takeover of the company. Yet they had a sister, Anais, who'd gone to school with one of my sisters, Kadence. They'd been friends, and she'd confided how she hated what they were doing to her late father's legacy. I'd pick the right time to come to her rescue. She could keep the face of the billion dollar business and I'd be her silent benefactor. The deal is all but done but once I finish this tour, I will be free to do as I wish and invest the capital she needs to take over the company.

The elevator dings, bringing me out of my musings. Elevator doors swoosh open. I find myself facing the backs of two giants. Giants who slowly turn to me with frowns on their faces.

"Hi," my smile fails miserably when they don't move for a small eternity. The one on the right steps back. I can't help but notice the way his shoes gleam against the polished floor.

The space I'm given to move forward and out of the elevator is barely enough, but as I pass the guard to my left steps back swiftly as if he's been burned.

Sliding him a mean look, I turn to the other guard. "Is Hassan here? He gave me this." He shoots a bored glance at the proffered card then speaks into his watch in what I assume is Arabic.

"His Highness will be with you shortly." He informs me in a polite tone, nodding to the seating area just inside the room. I clasp my hands nervously, already second guessing myself.

Why him? I really don't have an answer. Of the hundreds of nice guys I could have ended my drought with, why would I come here tonight knowing that he wants nothing other than sex? Because that's why. No strings. No promises. And if the rumor mill is true, he's discreet and he never has a lover more than once.

"Lyric."

I turn after a small eternity. It's like he's appeared out of nowhere. And it's only him. The guards have disappeared without a sound.

He towers over me, looking as severe as he did earlier. Not when he looked at me in the ballroom, no, he has that same severity as before during the screening.

The hairs on the back of my neck rise as if he's overtly threatened me when he's done nothing of the like. Still, I take step back watching as the muscle in his jaw ticks in response.

"You came." Stating the obvious along with hinting at why he's miffed. His Highness, as the guard called him doesn't like to be kept waiting. Noting and ignoring the information I don't apologize, I shrug. "I didn't have any other plans." Letting him know he's the lucky one. And he is more than he realizes.

"One night," he states the terms.

Now, it's my turn to assess the high and mighty prince.

"No gift?" I smirk, daring him.

Thick, gorgeous lashes lower, casting shadows on his sharp high cheekbones before he pierces me with a hard stare. "What would you like?"

“A yacht — just like yours.” I add a smirk just to fuck with him.

Silence falls between us. I see if he’s going to take the bait and cuss me out for daring to ask him for a hundred million dollar yacht. I’m the biggest star in the world, I could remind him of that.

Watching his assessment of me become too much, I can’t help the giggle that spills free as I watch the emotions play across his face that range from stunned disbelief and puzzlement to chagrin.

“Gotcha,” I quip.

He shakes his head a little, his hand covering his chiseled jaw. Personally, I think it’s to hide a smile. One, he’d rather perish than let me see.

“I thought you didn’t like me.” A self-deprecating shrug is my only armor.

“I don’t.” His voice is low as the depths of hell. “I’m still going to give you the best night of your life, Jameela. But only one night.”

My feet are glued to the floor as he steps to me. Reaching out, he gives me enough time to step away, but I don’t. My heart torn between the callousness of his words and the sheer intensity of his gaze. His fingers smooth over the side of my face. “I knew you would be soft. I wonder if you are everywhere?”

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The answer to that escaped me. Yes, I take care of my skin. Yes, I get lavish body treatments, but is my skin as soft as those of some of his set who don't and never had to work? No. I have blisters still healing on my feet from all the choreography I've been doing. I still have a healing scar on my knee from having an ACL repair last year. My skin occasionally keloids, so no, it won't be smooth everywhere.

"What does Jameela mean?" My voice is way softer than it's ever been. Like he's robbed me of its verbosity a little. He could've been calling me anything — bitch for all I know of his language.

"Jameela means beautiful." Instead of letting his hand fall away, he cups the back of my neck, arcing me to meet his jade gaze. I will have your answer." There is a challenge in that demand.

Holding his gaze, I swallow. He stalks closer, his body flush with mine, shaking his head. His hand slips around to the front of my neck squeezing a little.

"I need the words, beautiful." Gaze steady, he tracks every emotion blossoming in my eyes.

"Yes," I gasp against the light pressure and the arresting visual of his beautiful eyes and the emotion there.

Stepping back, he nods, linking our hands. "We shower first."

Tugging me behind him, he strides on legs so long, I have to double time to keep pace with his tread.

Entering the bedroom, he passes the huge imposing bed lying in the center of the room. I barely have time to take in the immaculate posh space.

Trekking into the shower behind him, I touch the area between my breasts. My heart is fluttering like a butterfly wings. Serious misgivings start to play around in my head. He just said he didn't like me. Why am I here? I'm in no way desperate. Why, after all this time, am I choosing to have this experience and with him of all people?

He drops my hand, turning towards with me an abruptness that's unsettling.

It takes me a minute to notice he's showing me his phone.

"My last testing results." I look down at the results from two days ago. "I haven't been with anyone in three months."

Immediately my mind goes to his date at the Golden Globes, which, if my math is right, is exactly three months ago. Angelica is a million dollar model and nearly as tall as he is, not to mention rail thin. A man of eclectic tastes, I muse to myself.

"Yours?" He inquires. I'm flummoxed thinking as I pull out my phone searching for my tests mandated before I started choreography for my tour a couple of months ago. Did they even get testing to cover sexual health? I had to do a physical and routine blood test. I also got my annual exam, but by now my medical team knows I'm celibate, so I'm not even sure they did those tests and I didn't bother to check.

Embarrassment heats my cheeks as I scroll through the results. What am I going to say if he asks?

"IUD?" His gaze speeds across the screen on my phone, not bothering to look at me.

"Yeah." His eyes meet mine over the phone.

“Good. I will have your consent not to use condoms.” Another demand.

“Uh, okay...” Not understanding, I take the phone back, placing it beside his on the counter.

He’s already turning to the glass-enclosed shower, manipulating the shower heads. Stepping just outside, he hits buttons starting the flow of water.

All of a sudden nervousness has the pressure in my tummy insisting that I use the restroom.

“The water closet is over there.” He nods to a nearby door. I don’t know how he can read me so easily. “G’head and take care of what you need I will join you momentarily.” He’s almost detached as he leaves me looking after him.

Is he so matter of fact with all his lovers? Maybe he views everything as transactional since he gifts them with the equivalent of a mortgage payment once he’s done with his one night of service.

Misgivings claw at me as I use the restroom. I’ve never been afraid to change my mind about anything. In this industry I know better than anyone how not to get a terrible deal. Like the time, one of the biggest companies in the industry offered a big contract in an effort to lure me away from FADE and Ghadi. It was a dream come true. Many people encourage me to take the hundreds of millions. Never mind, they wanted my creative property in perpetuity — all of my publishing. Ain’t no way.

Still, for some reason, I pull my hair into a topknot, and slip out of the silk romper I wore up here and go over to the shower. I’m actually proud of myself for stepping in like this is old hat. My fingers barely tremble when I take the brand new sponge off the wall mount.

Squeezing out the body wash from the dispenser, I work the sponge into a generous lather and begin to wash every inch of my body.

I feel a presence behind me. I don't turn, but continue my ritual. My hands slow as I caress each dip and curve of my body. He likes watching. He wants to come inside me. All of this I realize with each stroke of my body. He wants me but doesn't like me.

Suddenly, I realize why I'm still here despite his admission. Because this time it's my choice. I can choose to be with whom I want this time. Whether or not he likes me doesn't matter. I chose him as much as he's chosen me. He's not taking anything from me I don't want to give. I'm willingly giving myself to him. Freedom races through me as I fully lean into the power that was snatched away from me when was too young to realize it. Tonight I'm taking my power back. I didn't even realize it until now. I don't have to over analyze why I want it to be Hassan. It just is.

"Allow me." The words reach me just as I start going over my body again. Deft hands take the sponge from my hands. Firm strokes massage and tantalize me from neck to shoulder. Then the sponge is gone, and it's just long fingers touching me.

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Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:45 am

“I’ve longed to touch you,” he whispers, his hard body pressing against mine as he caresses my breasts. Long tapered fingers caress my nipples, pinching them into points of pleasure.

“Ahh,” I gasp, that piercing sensation slicing through me. No one has ever touched my nipples like this. I bypass them when I seek to satisfy myself. Heat settles low in my belly as he continues to manipulate me. I come to my tiptoes, arching into his touch.

“Delicious, jameela.” Murmuring words of praise he presses his heavy dick between my bottom cheeks. Slowly gliding between them, he causes more heady sensations to spiral through me.

“Damn, I love that your ass is real,” he chuckles.

“You thought it was fake?” I give him a mean look over my shoulder.

He slides his dick in an upward motion that has my jaw dropping when I see his massive length emerging.

“Not anymore,” he murmurs, smacking my cheeks, watching them jiggle and shake.

“Damn, lil’ mama,” he mutters, smacking it a few more times. We both watch as come spills from the head of his dick painting my ass.

Swiping the essence from the tip, he reaches forward, pressing the gooey drop between my lips. The tangy sweetness is novel to me. Wrapping my lips around his

finger, I close my eyes. A little whimper escapes me. I open my eyes to see him eating me up visually.

“You’re so fucking sexy, Lyric.” Grabbing me by the neck, he drags me closer to take my lips. He plunges his tongue into my mouth, dominating every inch he comes into contact with. He makes me take his tongue. Then devours mine in return, spearing inside with an aggressive lashing. I’ve never been kissed like this. No matter how sweet or nasty they’ve been before, none compare to the way this man seeks to own me. He takes my mouth with a sensual onslaught that has me whimpering, damn near begging to be ruined.

“Fuck,” he growls, backing me into the glass wall.

My back is still to him. His dick is pressed between us. An insistent reminder of what is to come.

Releasing my mouth on a growl, he trails a path to my ear where he sucks my lobe and swirls inside, making my knees nearly buckle. His arms snake around my waist, keeping me upright as he sucks the flesh of my neck into his mouth. The twinge of pain is barely noticed as he marks me as his. But just this one night, I remind myself.

Turning me so that my back is pressed to the glass, he cups and sucks my breasts. He devours them like it’s his last meal and he’s been starved.

Spearing my fingers into the lux curls of his hair, I hold him there, loving the way he lavishes my titties with attention. They are so sensitive from his earlier attention that I’m on my toes, trying to get every suck and nip of his cruel mouth. He sucks them together before pulling back.

“I’m going to fuck these pretty motherfuckers.” He dives back in, covering as much as of one into his mouth, sucking, before letting it pop free before giving the same

attention to the other.

Dipping down, he sucks the flesh beneath each, leaving passion marks beneath.

“Giving me something to remember?” My voice sounds foreign to my ears — thready; like I’ve been yearning just for him. My heart catches with the wild smile he gives me in return before he sucks and nibbles a trail down my belly. No amount of exercise has flattened it. But you can’t outrun diet and as long as I can do my choreography I don’t let being curvy bother me, I embrace it. I love how I look. I know better than anyone how many men love my fatness. Case in point the prince that’s kneeling between thighs my right now.

My heart threatens to beat out of my chest as I watch Hassan begin to worship my pussy. Green eyes meet mine as he takes his first taste. I don’t move, don’t breathe as his tongue appears, and he takes a long, lascivious lick. Diving between my lips, he strokes my clit. His tongue swirls around it, lapping at my bud like I’m his best meal. Like he’s been deprived of me. I can’t help but think this is how it should be.

“Ohmygoodness.” Grasping his thick curls, I don’t know if I want to pull him closer or push him away. My flesh is so sensitive. He’s not giving me any mercy, he’s relentless in his attentions. Yet, he never seemed like a merciful motherfucker.

Trying to open my trembling legs to give him better access, I whisper my need, “More, Hassan, please, I need more.”

He presses a soft kiss on my mound. “I like how you ask so prettily.”

Taking my thigh over his shoulder, he buries his head deep. “I’m going to give you what you need.” Lashing my entrance with deep strokes of his tongue, he makes me shudder.

“Fuccck,” Groaning, I arch into the tongue fucking he’s giving me.

“Exactly,” he says against my aching flesh before he gives me the tongue lashing of my life. I press my body back, canting my hips into the rhythm he rings from me.

I ride his tongue. Reaching for the promise of his offering. I’m so close. Grinding against his mouth, I use him mercilessly. He slips a finger inside, pressing deep as he flicks my clit in tandem. Beat, beat, beating against my turgid little bud in a cadence all his own making.

His name is a prayer, cry and curse on my lips as the orgasm he gives me sends me over the edge. My body shakes and spasms as my essence spills from me. He pulls back, watching me as I start coming down, shaking his head in wonder, biting his bottom lip as he keeps pressing. Keeps finger fucking, then dives back in. Soon I’m in knots, coming again for him.

“Fuck yeah, jameela,” he praises as I shatter again for him.

Easing his fingers out, he sucks one clean. Rising, dick sprung hard between us as he presses his slick middle finger into my mouth, making me taste myself. My eyes widen. Never have I done anything like this.

After a moment, I suck my essence off his fingers. He leans in, taking it from my tongue.

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Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:45 am

“Do you like how sweet you are?” He asks, pulling back his brow quirked in curiosity.

“I like what you like — tonight.” I hurry to add, not wanting to give too much of myself to this man.

“You like pussy? You want a third?” He questions, I know, testing my boundaries. Already shaking my head. “I don’t share.” I hold his gaze letting him know just how firm that boundary is.

“Me either. Kneel.” He orders, taking half a step back.

Unbelievably, I do, pushing past the trash heap of memories, knowing I want this for me as much as it will please him. My terms, my pleasure, my fucking choice.

“You’re gorgeous, you know that?” Looking up, I see softness in his eyes for the first time tonight.

Something in me preens from his words, making me want to please him knowing that he powerfulness I feel being the arbiter and the sole source of his desire.

Slowly, I take him in hand pumping g his dick. A big dollop of come drips from his dick falling to my tongue just as I cover the tip with my mouth.

“Hot little fucking mouth,” He groans, giving me a little thrust.

I take him back then, farther still. He doesn’t press he lets me do what I will. A

feeling of elation wraps around me as I pump and suck on the fulsome length of him. I can barely take half, but he doesn't seem to mind. His hand comes to rest on the crown of my head, but he only delves into my curls. The gentle pressure of his hand spurs me along. Soon the rhythm I've set has me taking him like a champ. I want this. The masculine musk of his sex coupled with the velvet steel of his length has my nipples budding as a pounding pressure builds in my sex. I'm slick with need for him.

"Get up." Pulling me to my feet, turning and pressing me into the glass wall. Nudging my legs he whispers, "Bend for me." I do. Looking over my shoulder, I stare into his eyes. "Yes, keep those pretty brown eyes on as I split this pretty ass pussy open."

I'm caught in the magic of his gaze as he pushes inside of me with a deliciously aching glide.

"Fuck, Lyric. Your pussy's so fucking tight." I watch as his eyes roll as he grits against the pressure. "Push back on me, yes, that's it lil' mama, just like that. Good girl." He encourages as he makes me take every inch of him in what seems like an endless drive.

"Damn girl," he hisses. His abs flexing from the exertion.

I'll never say I'm a quitter. But for a moment there, I don't think I can take him.

"You okay?" The question coming out on a pant. For a moment I want to disconnect, but his words of concern bring me back.

"Yeah, I think so." Even I can hear my uncertainty. His gaze holds so many questions. Questions I'm not ready to answer.

"Kiss me, Hassan, please," I whimper.

Something crosses his features for a moment at the obvious vulnerability he hears, but he leans in anyway, taking my lips in the lovely gentleness of his kiss.

Inhaling his delicious scent, I lose myself in the beauty of it. As he tastes me like it's the first time. As if I am something to be savored, treasured, cherished. His.

I let myself believe it because tonight — just for tonight it's true.

Long moments pass as my body slowly accepts his. Then, with the mildest yet wildest tangle of tongues, we start moving together.

Our bodies glide in a sensual dance. He presses deep, nearly but not quite bottoming out. Then with a reverse move he slides out, only to return, bringing pleasure along with a little taste of pain.

Immediately, I feel him graze my spot with a shift of his hips.

“Ahh.” The cry escape me on its own volition.

“That's it?” Comes the question as he drives more purposefully against it again.

“Yeah, yeah,” the words end on a breath as he robs me of words fucking me with an almost vicious relentlessness.

“Hassan,” pleading as he drives me to my tip toes, forcing me higher and higher as he fucks me into the glass of the shower. My eyes water.

“I like how you say my name,” he praises.

“Say it again.” Urging, his hips surging, our bodies slap into each other every time we meet.

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Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:45 am

My eyes are on him as his mouth curls into an almost cruel ferocity as he fucks me.

My ass jiggles and bounces from the sheer force of his thrusts.

“You got some good ass pussy, Empress.” His gaze cast a feral light as he uses my stage name.

“Come for me, sweetness.” Reaching around, he cups my flesh. Long fingers delve into my pussy. He made his command, but he takes his time playing with me with an almost lazy stroke. He fucks me with long surges, making me feel every inch, every curve of him.

“That’s it sparrow. Come like my good little song bird.”

My eyes roll because his words, more than anything, send me into the multiverse. I ascend to another plain of existence and it’s this mean motherfucker who says he doesn’t like me taking me there.

“Yes, fuck Lyric. The way your tight little kus squeezes me—” Thrusting hard, pushing into me over and over until he shouts my name as hot jets of his come fill me.

“Lyric.” Pressing kisses to my brow, he then takes my lips in a sweet kiss.

Easing out of me, he washes me and takes me to his bed.

One night that’s all he promises that’s all I want I tell myself after he loves on me all

night and into the morning.

Chapter Three

SURPRISE, SURPRISE

LYRIC

Two years later

“Why are we here again?” Fifi rolls her eyes, looking out at the rolls upon rolls of farmland we pass by on our way to Shelby-Love, Alabama.

“It’s a favor to FADE and it’s the kick off of publicity for the world tour. We have been over this like fifty-eleven times, girl.” I wave her off running my fingers through my son’s curly silken locs.

“Humph, that’s easy for you to say. Ain’t nobody going to be looking at you strange.” Crossing her arms she rolls her eyes again but she’s doing nothing to mar her lovely face. She literally the most beautiful person I have even seen with or without makeup not to mention her amazingly generous spirit and loyalty which she’s more than proven in the last couple of years.

“Fi, nobody is going to know anything.” It’s true despite her height of five-eleven, she looks exactly like what she is — a woman. She’s the only one who can’t see that. My bestie still has a little bit of body dysmorphia, but we’re working on that in therapy. “And if anyone does, we’ll kick their ass. You know Kandie and them don’t play that mess with their play cousins.” I assure her, recalling all the times one of the Love cousins came to visit us in the projects we grew up in. They treated us no different than their real cousins, Justice, Delightful, Lovie-Belle, and Miracle.

Fi visibly relaxes. My words bring a smile to her face. Which is good because we are at the venue of the fair doubled as Get Out The Vote event for Mathias Shelby, Delightful's cousin, Nikki's husband.

There is nothing that FADE won't do for his wife and drafting me into this surprise appearance is just the tip of the iceberg. After a near two year hiatus, coming back on the scene with a new album and tour isn't enough with new TikTok sensations popping every five minutes. I need to get my name out there with as much positive PR as possible. Especially with the abrupt cancellation of my tour a couple years ago. At the time I wanted to do nothing but lick my wounds and be alone with the brand new love of my life. I wasn't ready to share my baby with the world. I'm still not. But mommy has to work to secure his future and this is going to be my last hurrah. Though I haven't told anyone that not even Fi about my plans to retire when this tour is over. Not that Fi would be upset her money is set having branched out from being solely my stylist for years to having an entire list of A-list celebrity clientele. The other workers I need to set up for life after my retirement and one sure-fire way is for this tour to be a success. Many of them waited patiently for me while I was taking time off. I owe it to them to do my very best.

The car stops and we are met by the team that FADE set up beforehand. That's one thing I love about working with him – he always takes good care of his artists.

“Is this Ayaan?” Summer coos as soon as the driver opens the door. A thick band of security surrounds us. Anyone looking on won't even be able to tell it's me in this oversized hoodie. She's the only one who knows anything about him. Fi had to prearrange care for my baby while I perform and she gets me ready. Summer assured us over video chat he'd mix right in with the other toddlers and none would be the wiser.

Word's gotten out that a big celebrity will be in attendance but they don't know it's me. Locals aren't as excited about Santiago anymore since he and Mimi live down

here, so FADE asked me to come to help his cousin by marriage out despite the fact that Mathias and his wife are from families that have a Montague and Capulet level feud that's raged more than a century.

"Yes, this is my little prince." I tell her not even bothered by the accuracy of my words. His father is prince but I don't hold that against him I love my son no matter what.

"He's going to cut up. You know he's hasn't been around people like that," Fi warns as I prop him on my hip as we enter the tent that's set up for hair and make-up.

"I'll keep him with me until it's almost time to go on. He used to going with someone and when I perform." I assure Summer who seems unflappable at Fi's misgivings.

"The area where we have the kids is close to the stage and in line of sight of the stage, so he'll still see you and be able to play."

"Sounds good." I notice they already have a little play area neatly arranged in the tent. I put him down, watching as he toddles over to the little rug that has wood puzzles and jumbo blocks. In seconds I'm forgotten as he sees some of his favorite toys— dinosaurs and jungle animals.

"Roar, roar," he exclaims.

Summer immediately sits down crisscross and they're playing like old pals.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:45 am

“Alright,” Fi says pursing her lips. “Let’s create an empress out of an elf.”

“I know you didn’t.” Gasping at the disrespect, I can’t help but join the laughter of her and Summer, who also can’t seem to keep it together.

In less than an hour she has my hair and makeup flawless as always. “The milk and honey forty-inch buss down is immaculate.” I tell her marveling at the blond wig she handmade and convinced me to try when I began training for this new tour. Turning, I watch the waves swing, stopping well below my bottom cheeks.

“Alright let’s suit up.” I’m only going to do a couple songs and ask everyone to register to vote. Being from Birmingham it’s kinda a legacy thing to encourage folks to vote; too many people fought and died for that right. Now, who they vote for ain’t none of my business. But anyone who knows me knows what my politics are and I’ve never hid it — not when I started and definitely not now that I have a bigger platform. Would I do something like this for his opponent? Never. Keeping it classy is my moniker these days. Still, I have to look exceptional because on the rare occasion anyone gets a shot of me not looking my best the blogs have a field day.

Fi hurries over with a designer piece. A white denim jumpsuit with strategic cutouts. “I swear this is taking longer to get on than the wig.” Grumbling, I wiggle and twist my body into the outfit that has built in shape wear. “You’re going to have to check to make sure my wig hasn’t come loose after this.” I huff jumping to get the jeans on. Yes, I trained so that I could have the stamina required for my upcoming tour but these curves don’t quit especially now with the extra plumpness having a baby gives me.

“I will.” Fi says, already sensing I’m about to get snappish now performance time is nearing. It’s jitters pure and simple and this the first time I’ve performed outside of industry listening parties since I finished the album.

I’m not a diva. Perfectionist, damn straight. I’m the employer of hundreds of people down an endless chain and each an every one of them depends on me being excellent in order for them to make a living. This goes from the top with Fi all the way to my household help. Me screwing up affects us all and me being in the right headspace means I’m able to do what I need to make all their livelihoods possible.

“There,” she says after zipping up the back of the outfit, a secure the neck clasp to ensure there are no wardrobe malfunctions. I always have to make sure my clothes aren’t at risk of tears or slippage.

Turning, I watch the rhinestones hit the lights, just as the designer intended. My tummy, hips and bottom aren’t camouflaged, so they disappear. No, they are on display in a love your curves kind of way.

Grinning at my reflection, seeing the peekaboo cut out that shows my love handles brings pure joy. It’s a big fuck you to the skinny obsessed media who tried to drag my plumpness.

“Nah, you dive into that shit.” FADE told me when my feelings got hurt after my sophomore project went double platinum and I wore a body positive outfit to the Grammys to accept my award and perform. It’s wild how those who claim they are feminist come for Black women when we own our freedom. Thankfully, I used that as a teaching opportunity and started a body positive and empowerment movement, “Own Your Curves.”

Having young girls come to me letting me know how much that made difference in their lives was worth the slings and arrows I’ve gotten in the process from haters.

“You out did yourself this time, Summer,” I look at the baby designer who I commissioned to do all my outfits for this tour after I saw the lovely wedding dress she made Mimi a couple years ago when she married Santiago.

Now, she’s doing Nikki’s entire wardrobe for Mathias’ senate run as they tour every county in the state. She’s a rising star in the fashion world and though I’m helping to platform her, everyone knows I don’t fuck with lame ass people. I’m the lucky one because she’s saving me money being a newbie. It frees me from the exorbitant prices of using a big name.

“Five minutes.” One of the security women, FADE, supplied calls from the entrance.

“Okay,” Fi says to the room at large. “We know what to do, people. Let’s have a prayer before the Empress hits the stage.” Everyone comes over and we say a quick prayer.

Afterwards, I press a kiss on Ayaan’s crown as Summer leaves so he can go play with Mateo, Mimi’s son.

“Ready?” Fi asks as we stand in the shadows watching Mathias’s closing statement and him asking for the vote of all those present.

“When am I not?” I grin, so ready to take the stage. Other than my son, I love this most in the world. I don’t think there is anything that will compare.

“That was wild.” I tell Fi rocking Ayaan, who wanted me to hold him while I read to him, only to fall asleep shortly after. My baby was exhausted. Right after my set the alarm went out that Nikki was missing. Luckily, she was found, but not in a good way. She and Joi almost died in a fire. We stayed with the Love family until they were both out of the woods.

“We’re lucky to be flying private,” Fi says from the side of the jet she’s commandeered.

“Yeah, being three hours late generally means you have to reschedule, but Mr. Takeda letting us use his private airfield to fly in and out was kindness itself.” I agree, stroking Ayaan’s back.

“He only did it for FADE and Krie,” she scoffs. “Did you see how cold he was just shooting off orders left and right? He knows how to get shit done.” She fans herself.

“Babe, I did.” Smiling, I have to agree. “He’s sexy as fuck. If I weren’t sworn off fine ass men and he was single, I’d play with him a little bit.” I glance at my little reminder of my last adventure.

“You can’t let that stop you. Just make sure your IUD is not expired next time.” She dead eyes me for a long moment before we laugh at it. That shit was not funny two years ago, though. I was terrified.

“I still can’t believe you finally decided to get down with the get down and you get knocked up the first time.” She bursts out laughing like it’s the funniest thing in the world.

“I’m glad I can be a source of entertainment for you, hoe.” I roll my eyes. It’s funny, but it’s not because it’s not true. Choices have consequences and I’m still paying for the one I made not going on tour. I only avoided a lawsuit because I’m doing the sold out tour I canceled two years ago now after a lot of negotiating on FADE’s behalf.

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t change anything. I know you wouldn’t either.” Eyes soft, she reaches over to touch Ayaan’s soft curls.

“I can’t stand you,” I grumble when she rights herself in her seat, pulling out her

phone.

“I can’t believe Joi, did all that stuff.” Easing Ayaan down into the little bed I made for him, I stand. Now that he’s sleeping soundly, I can use the restroom.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:45 am

“Humph, you never know about people,” Fi mumbles, scrolling on her phone as I walk by heading to the back of the cabin.

When I return, she meets me in the aisle.

“Girl, look at this mess. Joi was on a real one today.” The horror on her face has a sick, sinking feeling settling in my tummy.

SHELBY-LOVE CHRONICLE EXCLUSIVE

SUPER STAR’S SECRET SON

“I knowthe fuck she didn’t,” I swear, looking at the time stamp on the article. It’s marked six hours earlier, well before the incident. Right beside a picture of my son is a description and guesstimates of my son’s age and parentage. She says clearly that he has green eyes and assumes he’s biracial, which he’s not. Hassan is Black North African.

Grabbing my phone, I hit FADE’s number. “Aye, Lyric. I hear congratulations are in order. I got a nephew, man?” He growls over FaceTime, his handsome face marred by the deep cutting turn of his lips. “Everything makes sense now. How did you get Fi to keep this big of a secret? I’ll never know.” His deep baritone holds all the emotion I wanted to avoid. Disbelief, hurt and anger as he shakes his head.

“I’m sorry.” I start.

“Nope. You don’t get to do that shit, Lyric. We’ve been together too long for that

kind of BS. I know why you did it, baby girl. One look at him and I knew why you disappeared out of our lives for two years and cancelled your world tour.” He shakes his head again, sighing before raking his hand through his close cropped curls in agitation.

I still remember how he put himself on the line telling people I needed a mental health break and I was taking a hiatus. He defended me when people were saying I was on drugs; orchestrating a publicity stunt, or I was just being difficult holding out for more money.

“I was scared you’d tell him. He’s one of your best friends.” I move away from where Ayaan is sleeping, not wanting to him seeing me upset if he wakes up.

“Damn straight, I would tell him as soon as I knew. You have no right keeping that man’s child from him, Lyric. What the fuck are you were thinking?” Raking his hands through his curls again, he looks at me in disbelief, his words angry at my betrayal.

“I wasn’t, okay? My fear overwhelmed me.” My heart is racing just thinking back to how the best night of my life turned into a nightmare.

Stretching, I reach out and the bed is empty. Sitting up, I push the wild mass of curls out of my face. I only wear wigs for performances. I’m so tender headed, I’d be inviting a migraine if I constantly wore the tight bands on my head that Fi uses to secure my hair for shows and appearances. Mostly when I’m not in public, I wear my hair in its natural kinky curls.

Hassan didn’t seem to mind though, if anything he seemed to love touching my hair all night.

Checking the empty space and the open door to the bathroom and him not emerging, I

guess time is up. It's very close to dawn and I don't know what made me wake. His side is still kind of warm. So he can't have left too long ago. Maybe he's giving me the respect of a less awkward goodbye.

The light streaming in reminds me of the rarity of me ever being up this early. Most nights find me in the studio making music or collaborating with FADE, Ghadi or some other up-and-coming artist FADE has his eye on and wants to give a chance. Late nights in the studio never make for early mornings. The sun is so beautiful. It draws me like a load stone out to the balcony.

Grabbing the button-down shirt he tossed on a nearby chair, I step out into the windswept morning, going straight to the balcony looking out to the skyline. It's always beautiful. I never regret the move here and leaving New York state. FADE says I abandoned him, but Delightful understands since she lived out here for years and now both her sisters stay here and she visits often. I know she's hoping to sway him over to the west coast.

Inhaling, I get a whiff of the familiar scent of him. A movement draws my attention. Turning, I see him rising. He grabs his prayer rug, folding it, his gaze raking over me.

"Sorry, I just wanted to see the sunrise. It's so beautiful." My voice sounds so soft and hesitant. It's something about this man that softens me. Makes me want to please him like I've never felt the urge to for anyone in my life — not even Justice, who was the kindest, sweetest soul to have ever graced this earth. I know I'm building him up, but I want to keep that one thing as close to perfect because for a long time he was my only good thing.

Placing the rug on the chair as he passes, he comes to stand before me. He's dressed in white linen and I can tell my this swing of his dick against the fabric that the linen pants are all he has on.

“You are what’s beautiful.” He looks at me like he means it. Blushing, I turn from him and ducking my head, suddenly verymuch aware of the wildness of my hair and how I probably look sleep drunk.

His heavy presence crowds behind me. “Plus, I like you wearing my shit.” The low growl hits me like the most potent aphrodisiac. Heat pools low in my belly, which only intensifies when I feel the press of his hard dick on my bottom.

“I know I said just for the night but I want you again if you would have me, Lyric.” I’m already nodding, turning to go back to the room .

“No, here.” He turns me back to the sun rising over the horizon.

He positions me with my legs spread and my ass tilted to take him. Dropping his linen trousers, he steps between my spread thighs wrapping his strong arm around my waist to hold me steady.

“I’ll try to be gentle, jameela, but that’s all I can do it is promise to try because you were such a good fucking girl taking me last night I fear I may lose control like I did last night in this good ass pussy.” He talks me through it as he pushes his thick, hard length past my lips and breaches my pussy with the most insistent thrust.

“Ohmygoodness, Hassan,” I whimper, taking every thick inch he’s giving me.

“You’re doing so good, babe. Take this motherfucker like the Empress you are,” he commands me like he owns every inch of me and in this moment he does. There’s nothing he could ask of me I won’t give him.

“Is it good?” He has the nerve to ask.

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“It’s good. So good Hassan, so good.” I turn to look at those pretty ass eyes as he fucks me. Gripping my nape with his other hand, he holds me still as he drives deep inside me. I couldn’t leave if I wanted to. Oddly, I feel safe with him. He’s doing this to give me pleasure. Each thrust brings us closer and closer until I’m clutching at him, trying my best to get into his skin as he hits my spot over, and over again.

“Has—” the word cuts short as the sharp crest of my orgasm hits me.

Snatching me to him, he eats at my mouth, fucking me through my orgasm.

“Wrap those thick ass thighs around me, ma,” he urges, pulling out his dick wet from me and still hard.

He lifts me, helping me reposition my legs around his waist. He cups my bottom, lifting me higher, lining me up with his dick, slowly thrusting while pressing me down on his length.

“That’s right. Breathe, baby, take this motherfucker.” His gaze locks on where our bodies join.

My synopsis threaten to misfire after I follow his direction and it feels like he’s in my fucking chest.

Holding me, he moves over to the chaises lining the balcony. Every step he takes to the one of the chaise lounges is an agony of pain and pleasure. Every step pushes his dick deeper into me. It’s a tease and delicious torment with every step.

Resting his back against the sofa, his eyes search my face. “We good, Lyric?”

“Yes,” I pant, easing up and down his length.

“Good, ride this motherfucker like you own it.” He grits out, showing me the rhythm he wants. He’s dominating me from the bottom. I grind my hips in a swirl and snap. Each drag of his dick against my already clenching muscles has me panting. Each movement is a torturous tease against my clit as well. Soon I’m chasing sensation after delicious sensation.

“Hell yeah, sparrow. Fuck me.” He growls, thrusting up into me. Leaning down, I take his lips. Reaching between us, he caresses my clit again and again, bringing me close and matching me stroke for stroke. Soon we are panting and straining. “Fuck,” he shouts, his fingers speeding, forcing me into the twisting sharp pleasure of a shared climax. I feel his dick flexing as he comes deep inside me.

I learned over the course of the evening he loves seeing my pussy filled with his come. New kink unleashed for me because I love when he played in it making me come for him again and again.

Drawing me into his arms we are quiet as our bodies cool off watching the sun fully emerge.

“You hungry?” He asks later when I wake in the bed. He has on glasses reading a script on his tablet from what I can see. The cutest five o’clock shadow is emerging because he’s not shaved yet. He doesn’t seem at all bothered by being naked working in bed while I slept beside him, just as naked. He might have liked me in his shirt, but he’s not let me put any clothes back on since then. Nudity is nothing to me since I have at least a dozen people around me between wardrobe changes during performances.

“Yep.” I say nothing about leaving because, to be honest, I don’t want to. He obviously feels the same way, because he’s kept me in this bed, making love to me all morning.

Instead of going into his office, he messaged his assistant he was working remotely.

“I’ll order for both of us,” he says, picking up the room’s phone and ordering two fruit salads; him steak and eggs and me pancakes and turkey sausage, a carafe of coffee, and orange juice.

“I’m going to take a quick shower.” Leaning over, I brush a soft kiss on his firm lips. He cups my neck, drawing me into a deeper kiss.

“Don’t take too long. I like you being here with me,” he admits lowly, like it’s as unexpected for him as it is for me.

“Same.” I smile, meaning it. It seems like he may like me more than he thought.

I finish my shower in record time. I just pull my curls up in a loose topknot, deciding to let Fi worry about it later.

Taking one of the robes Hassan left for me, I pull it on over his dress shirt. I’m sliding my arms into the sleeves, walking out into the living room area when I hear voices. At first I think it’s room service. Until I hear a word in Arabic which I am very familiar with. “Habibi” — my love.

From a soft, almost giddy feminine voice.

I’m standing at the entrance of the living area while Hassan’s back is to me as he stands in front of a table laden with food.

He's rubbing his neck in agitation, but his voice is everything that is loving as he talks to the woman on the phone.

"I never even asked him if he was married." Flutters through my mind as I stand there feeling like an idiot.

Ugh. A sick feeling settles in my stomach as I glimpse the beautiful woman on the video chat screen. I know she's not his sister. I have seen many pictures of her with them from various official pictures of their family across the web.

He says something more to her and returns with his own expression of "Habibti". I have enough Middle Eastern friends to know that they don't just throw the equivalent of 'my love' around to random women.

On bare feet, I make my way over to the door. It was okay as long as I didn't know, but there is no way in hell I'm fucking a married man. He's so deep in conversation he doesn't notice me. I'm not even stopping for my clothes. I took my shoes off at the door out of respect last night, so I bend to grab those.

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“Lyric.” The harsh sound of my name has me stumbling as I’m pulling on my shoes. My fingers seem to be all thumbs, so I give up. Turning around, I face him, dread consuming me as if I were the one caught speaking to a significant other.

“Um...” I hesitate, seeing the hard look on his face rife with angry expectation. Despite the rumors, actually hate confrontation and avoid it at all costs. What people get as tabloid fodder is when I have been pushed to the brink because I’ve been too nice and let folks get away with too much, which is something FADE has got on me about many, many times. Perfectionist? Yes, when it comes to my craft and giving the fans what they pay their hard earned money for, but just being a pain in the ass for ego’s sake has never been my thing. So when this six-foot-four mountain is frowning down at me with the expectation of me throwing a fit, I just shake my head, backing up a step. Well, two.

“Didn’t know you were married.” My nose stings. Blinking fast as the horror I’m about to cry hammers into me. I’m acting like this is my fault. I’ve never heard that he was married — should have suspected. He’s a royal, for goodness’ sake.

“I’m not. Khadijah is my fiancée,” he states with grim finality.

“Okay, fiancée then. I didn’t know you were engaged. I would never—” words fail me. Raising my arms while holding the shoes, I feel ridiculous letting them flop at my sides. I turn to leave.

“Let me fuck you raw all last night and this morning?” He scoffs in disbelief like, ‘Sure Jan’.

Heat races to my face like he's smacked me. I swing back around, hurt making my voice sound weak, and I hate that for myself. "No, no, I wouldn't have, Hassan."

In that moment, I can see every terrible thing he thinks about me playing across his face right before he says, "Yet you'll sneak away like a coward instead of talking to me like an adult." Disdain drips from every word.

I clamp my mouth shut, refusing to let him blame this on me.

"And do what? Are we including Khadijah in on this conversation?" Scorn drips from my lips as I shake my head, looking at his serial cheating ass. "Let her know how you're going raw up into bitches while she's waiting for you in Morocco?" If I thought my words would bother him, I should have thought again.

"You fucking Americans with your fake ass puritanical ideas. She knows who I am just as you did last night when you let me come inside you again and again," he sneers down at me.

I'm not going to allow him to treat me this way. As much as I want to smush his fucking face in the wall beside me, I know this is a battle I can't win.

Plus, he's had his mind made up about me long before last night. It may have meant nothing to him, but it was everything to me. I'm not going to let him take that from me. He served his purpose.

"It was just supposed to be one night anyway," I say as cavalierly as I can with a negligent shrug of my shoulder.

Turning, I press the button to the elevator. Nothing happens. That's when I remember the access code. I don't have the card and I definitely don't remember the code.

After what seems like a small lifetime, I smell his cologne as he reaches past me to put in the code.

“Goodbye, Lyric.” His tone is furious in its finality.

“Bye.” I step into the doors.

He watches me as I leave his face filled with cold rage.

Chapter Four

REVELATION

PRINCE HASSAN AL RASHEED

“Oh, Habibti, please say we can.” I look up from the blueprints for a new hospital that needs to be built in Rabat to the tedious plans for this fucking wedding that’s supposed to take place in three months’ time.

“Sure, whatever you want, my love.” I murmur dismissively even though I haven’t heard a word and couldn’t care less about what Khadijah, my soon to be wife, wants at this wedding that is ranging in costs to the tens of millions at this point.

I’m so ready to be done with it all. We’ve been in negotiations with her father, one of the world’s biggest oil and real estate magnates for a more than a year and the signatures on the contracts are barely dry and we are already in eight figures for the seven-day affair. There has been no limit to the Khadijah’s wishes, and no expense spared to the only daughter of Jhori Bin-Saladin. He may have his five sons fighting for control of the vast riches, but his only daughter he lavishes with everything her heart desires and he can give her. He is also not above her betrothed and my family, despite our royal blood displaying our gratitude for having her join our family.

Especially since my brother Sadiq, the other crown prince, lowered himself to marry a commoner and an American to boot. He nearly pulled out of the marriage, then based on my brother's actions. Only his love for his daughter allowed him to come back to the negotiating table.

"Yay," she jumps up with glee, clapping her hands like I hold the world. I close my eyes, not being able to bear the sight. She's a lovely girl, my sister Amani's best friend. And we've been betrothed the better part of a decade when she was a teen and I on the cusp of my majority, but there is not where the misgivings lay. It's that I feel utterly nothing for her other than brotherly affection. And seeing the love between my parents making it even more apparent. Yet duty calls and it all falls to me since Sadiq followed his heart when he married Lovie-Belle. I knew the moment I nearly caught them kissing when she was visiting for a brief stay during the making of our movie Just Forever that they were inevitable.

"Ahem," comes the dulcet tones of my mother's admonition.

"Yes, Umm?" Turning, I wait, watching her brow quirk in frustration. Only I'm not sure who is warranting the reaction, me for my inattention or my soon to be bride for her exuberance.

"I would remind you that getting a star of the Empresses's caliber at short notice is not only going to be exorbitant but near impossible as she starts her world tour." My mother informs us both calmly. Filling me in on what the discussion I'd been doing my best to ignore entailed.

I try to quell any reaction at the mention of Lyric's stage name. Still, I can feel the muscle in my jaw flexing. It's not a surprise Khadijah wants Lyric to perform at our wedding. It's all she's spoken about from the moment our engagement was formally announced and we've been able to speak freely with oneanother without a chaperone sitting beside us. They are still in the room, but we can at least have a conversation.

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“I’m her biggest fan,” was the first thing she ever told me, then asked me for all the signed Empress merch I could get my hands on. Which I was happy to oblige, since as one of FADE’s best friends and business partners, I had access to whatever she desired.

That all ended after the night and morning we spent together. For reasons known only to a few, Lyric canceled her tour, causing FADE, and Creative Chaos to take a huge PR hit. FADE went to bat for her, but there was huge speculation in the press and online surrounding her abrupt canceling of the tour — everything from depression, and addiction, to her being treated for cancer. And no one on her team talked. Lawsuits were threatened, but nothing could persuade the diva, who seemed to throw the biggest tantrum the world has ever seen to come out of hiding. Eventually, it worked out that she would do the promised world tour as soon as she felt better.

“She going to Cairo, Nairobi, Accra and Johannesburg. I’m she can stop by and do this one little favor for you, can’t she, my love?” Khadijah wheedles sweetly, her twin dimples, making her look cute and innocent. She’s a shark when it comes to getting what she wants, so I’m not fooled.

I know she’s not given to sulks and tantrums, but I know I need to shut this shit down immediately. There is no way in hell I am ever asking Lyric for a damn thing, let alone to perform at my wedding.

“We’ll see,” I say, which means, hell no. I watch as my mother nods in agreement on my chosen tactic.

“Thank you, Habibi,” she coos. Nodding, I know this is far from the last time I’ll be

hearing about this. I don't want to start out our marriage with a deception, but I know I must be seen actively working to attain this goal or I will have no fucking peace in this marriage.

“At least we now know why she's been on hiatus. All those people calling her an addict and mentally unstable need to apologize, especially that Amy Reyes person who ran all those terrible stories about her.” She crosses her arms in defense of her favorite star.

“What really happened?” Umm, asks unable to help herself from the gossip. No one in Khadijah's sphere can escape her tantalizing tidbits. She would have been a brilliant journalist were she not the daughter of a billionaire and destined to be my queen.

“So no serious illness?” FADE would have said something if his biggest star were ill. Hell, he would have stopped everything for Lyric. They are so close I thought they were lovers until the night she gave herself to me. I don't investigate why I care. After the way I left things, I don't have the right. My cruelty that morning was out of pocket, even for me. Ruthless? Yes. Unforgiving? Absolutely. Needlessly cruel to a woman who gave me the best night of my life? Should be never, but I did it anyway. The way she looked so brave in my shirt wrapped in that robe as the elevator closed haunts my fucking dreams.

The callousness of how I treated her that morning was unforgivable. There were times when I saw everything that happened shortly after our interlude that I thought it was because of me. I quickly cast that aside. There is no way I could have been the cause when she's been known to toss away lovers left and right.

When she said she didn't think I liked her, I told her the truth. I didn't. Her reputation preceded her, but that didn't stop my dick from bricking as I sat beside her in that movie. No. If anything, I thought I met my sexual match finally that night. A baddie

in the streets and a sub in the sheets. The grip on her pussy had me thinking she could've been a virgin. Not with her track record, one that she never refutes either. I think that's why I took such offense at her judgment about my engagement. It was only later that I realized that I'd never heard her linked with a man in a relationship. I guess everyone has a line they won't cross.

I roll my shoulders, trying to rid myself of the sudden tightness in my chest thinking about her brings.

"Nope. No illness, no drugs." She hums and keeps humming. Umm and I look at her in puzzlement. She hums louder. I pick up the tune. It's a lullaby.

"A baby, silly." She claps her hands with glee. "Lyric had a baby. That's why she didn't go on tour two years ago. And it looks like she kept it a secret." Then she reads aloud. "When finally reached for comment FADE, the Creative Chaos CEO said, no comment. When spotted leaving an unnamed actress's condo, Ghadi Carrington responded, "This is news to me, man. I wish her and the little one good health and happiness."

She turns round eyes to us. "The only reason we know about is this picture taken of the baby at this fair in some small town in Alabama. It was posted there first. Isn't he adorable?" She does this little stumping of her feet that would be fucking adorable if an anguished roar wasn't filling my fucking ears.

There has never been a moment when I have seen my life flash before my eyes, but in that moment when my fiancée, completely oblivious to the emotions raging within me, hands me her iPad, it is then I fully understand the sentiment. I know before she reaches out, holding the tablet in my direction.

Grabbing the tablet, I look into the face that with the exception of a slightly darker skin tone is exactly like mine and my identical twin brother Sadiq, complete with our

unmistakable green eyes.

“The plane is being diverted as we speak.”

I nod to Fariq, the head of my security words, my eyes on the preparations I’m making for my son and his treacherous mother.

“Once they are in our airspace, we make the plane disappear. I don’t want anything traced back to the royal family.” My low tones are devoid of the emotions raging inside of me. I’ve learned from the best. I’ve watched Baba handle our government with cold calm proficiency since Sadiq and I were at his knee at three.

He gives me the briefest of nods before I continue.

“I will go with you to pick the prince up. Only the most discreet men, you understand?” He nods again. “Have everything prepared for our arrival in Fez.”

“And the women?” I ponder what to do with her. Killing her little deceitful ass seems like the best idea. I could take my son and no one would be the wiser. FADE would know. There’s no way I’m killing my friend over her ass, and that is what I would have to do. Her plane is being diverted thanks to a well-placed bribe, but once it never arrives in Cairo, all hell will break loose and people begin searching. By the time it’s discovered me having custody of my son will be done deal.

“Bring them, but keep them separated once they get to the palace.” Dismissing him, I go over every detail of what I know so far about Lyric and my son, who she’s named Ayaan. She thinks of him as a blessing.

Questions swirl around in my mind. She said she had an IUD. It was on the paperwork I viewed on her phone, a copper one. They never fail, so how the fuck did she end up pregnant with my child? Was it a trap? And if so what is her end

game? Normally, if someone wanted to claim parentage of a royal, they would do it as soon as possible.

She's kept this secret for nearly two years. My son has already had his first birthday. I've missed an entire year of his life because of her. He's been denied my love and protection, that should have been his from the moment she knew she carried my child.

In the two hours that followed me making my excuses and leaving Umm and Khadijah to the wedding planning, I have had all her medical records and those of my son sent to me.

I didn't even bother calling FADE because either he knew or he was in the dark as much as I. We started in the music game together after my father all but disowned Sadiq and I for not following in his precise footsteps and taking our places and crown princes. We didn't want his life. We wanted to forge our own path. It left us estranged for years. We made our own way building an empire of our own with vast resources and not all of them legal.

The syndicates we partner with are the true source of our power, with many tentacles that can do certain tasks like snatch a duplicitous little pop star right out the air.

When my driver pulls up to the private airstrip, my heart races. I tell myself it's in anticipation of seeing my son for the first time. "Liar," that darker inner voice that lurks within me reticulates to whisper. "It's her that has your heart racing. The Empress who has your dick hard at the thought of seeing her again."

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Not one to lie to myself I let the thought wash over me. Acceptance of my lust for this woman settles in along with incandescent rage spiraling through me at her audacity in thinking she would keep my child from me. He's not some side dude's by blow. He's a fucking prince — like his father and his ancestors for millennia or more.

She will rue the day she thought to keep my child from me. I will take so much pleasure in showing her that her diva ways won't be tolerated as the mother of my heir. She will learn that she breathes at my mercy. Break her, I shall. She made me her enemy the moment she knew she carried my heir and said nothing. The wrath of the Al Rasheed is well known the world over. She will have keen awareness of what running afoul of me brings.

“Your Highness,” My driver sweeping the door open, draws my attention away from my retaliatory musings.

“They await you aboard the plane. The tall woman is causing quite a fuss. Should we neutralize her?” Fariq inquires with an almost bored expression on his face, but I notice the way his jaw ticks. It's rare anything elicits a reaction from him.

“Not yet. Take her somewhere where she won't be able to collude with her friend.” I quirk my brow at the mutinous expression on his face. A modern day elite Janissary, a hardened warrior and my personal guard; a friend all my life, I know when something is up with Fariq. Brow quirked, I wait for him to answer my silently inquiry.

Stoic stoniness drops over his expression. “I'll see to it, Your Highness.”

Passing him with a brief nod, I head to the plane flanked by a cadre of handpicked

soldiers.

Bounding up the stairs two at a time, I make little work of the distance. Bypassing the crew that has been secured and blindfolded in the cockpit, I stand at the front of the living space on the Airbus 380, FADE has outfitted to the specifications of his biggest star.

It's a Creative Chaos plane, but is used exclusively by Lyric. The perks of being the biggest star in the world have no end.

It takes me seconds to find Ayaan curled his mother's lap. He's sleeping despite the commotion of Lyric's friend Fifi, not to quietly demanding, "What the fuck is going on?" to Moussa, Fariq's brother and my second in command.

He slow blinks and I can tell that he wants to neutralize her just as his brother asks.

"Shh." Immediately, my gaze narrows on the cause of all this — Lyric. Idly she strokes Ayaan's thick tousled curls, her eyes raking over me in an emotionless sweep of a gaze. She looks unsurprised. Good.

"Bring me my son, woman." Harsh words erupt from me with a fury that has every person on the plane freezing. The hushed voices of the crew silence and even the vivacious friend's mouth snaps close.

Gathering Ayaan with a meticulous slowness close to her small, curvy frame, Lyric rises. And damn if having my baby doesn't look good on the little menace. Grabbing a bag, she pulls it over her other shoulder. The romper she wears throws me back to the one she wore the night we created our amazing blessing. My heart squeezes as she draws closer. I can't take my eyes off him. Them. Throat tight, I swallow past the constriction. My heart is beating out my chest when she stops in from of me.

If I thought this was going to be a fight or she was going to make a scene, I would be wrong. It takes me a moment to realize she's lifting him towards me. Just as I hold my arms out, his eyes open, bright sparkling and even brighter green than mine, that happens every other generation or so.

Confusion wrinkles his brow for a millisecond before his head whips around to his mommy, then back to me.

"Daddy?" he asks in the most sweet, melodious baby voice. Impossibly, he turns back and forth between Lyric and me, asking. "Mommy? Daddy?" So much hope in those words they nearly make my knees buckle.

"Yes, sugar, that's daddy," she coos, rubbing his back. Little feet kicking in some hard as fuck sturdy little shoes that catch me a couple times as he reaches for me. Astonishment that he knows me rockets through me so hard that it takes me a moment to adjust to yet another revelation.

Taking my squirming, excited little bundle, we face each other for a moment.

"Daddy." Chubby little hands cup my face as he looks at me with delight.

"Hey, little prince." I don't trust myself with words beyond this point.

"Let's go home, son." I finally manage tucking him close, ready to deplane.

"Mommy." He looks over my shoulder. "She's coming." Assuring him in this is all I can promise at the moment. Deciding to let her live long enough to explain herself.

Chapter Five

THE RECKONING

LYRIC

I haven't seen my son in the two hours since they brought me to this suite of rooms. I'm about to blow this bitch up. Ignoring the plushness of the thick handwoven carpet and the gentle glow of the room, I pace back and forth agitated dread vibrating within every fiber of my being.

I was being good, I promised myself I would be better I wasn't going to raise my son in the manner I was. No toxic bullshit. No one using him for leverage. I told him about Hassan from the moment he was understood what his faced looked like. I would let him kiss a photo every night after his prayers. Hassan though not present in his every day life was a real for him as I was. He saw videos of him. Ayaan knows him as his daddy. It was the best I could do after trying my best to figure out how I was going to tell him he had a child, a son, a possible heir. My decision not to tell him plagued me for the entire pregnancy. He was engaged, unapologetically taking lovers, and some part of me didn't know what a man like him would do when someone he obviously couldn't stand and had so little regard for that he couldn't even be bothered to tell me about his engagement came to him to say her contraception failed and she was pregnant.

I know the moment I found out I was keeping Ayaan. He was the one being that was mine created if not by love then an amazing night of passion.

The gift Hassan gave me that night was not only me having sex on my own terms, but my beautiful baby. I wanted Ayaan to love him, even he never got the chance to know or be acknowledged my him.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:45 am

I know I was wrong. I took the coward's way in not telling him but I just didn't want to ever see him again after that morning. No one was more shocked than me when two month's later at the routine physical before the start of the tour I found out that I was eight weeks pregnant. The doctor immediately offered to terminate. Being employed by Creative Chaos I think she thought it was a no brainer. Instead, I had her remove the defunct IUD, which was only good for ten years and I was well past the six month grace passed and needed to get a new one I found out later.

I got another private doctor who took care of me during my pregnancy. I like Dr. Garrett but her staff was gossipy and I didn't want my condition leaked. Dr. Kassan afforded me the privacy I needed, plus I heard how Delightful raved about her when she was pregnant with Baby Justice.

Thinking of my friend, I know from the text of row after row of frowny faces she sent that she's mad that I didn't tell her. I just didn't want to put her in the position of having to lie to FADE. I wasn't going to be the cause of them having problems over my decisions. Just as I hate the fact Fi is having to deal with the repercussions now.

Along with Ayaan, I also have no idea where she is. The Rolls-Royce she was placed in peeled off in the opposite direction of the one we took to come to this palace.

Walking over to the seating area facing the interior garden, I look down at the now chilled tea service. My tummy rumbles but I know if I dare eat I'll hurl all the food from the sheer amount of nerves I feel.

The softness in Hassan's eyes as he looked down at Ayaan could be rivaled by noting but the sheer malice and rage burning in his eyes as he beheld me. If the earth opened

then it would probably be a greater mercy than what the prince has in store for me. And I deserve it, I know.

I'd never expect him to understand the fear. He's always had power from since before he knew he had it let alone wield it. It's the complete antithesis of a poor girl growing up in the Elyton Village projects. I know he could never understand a woman like me. The things I had to do just to survive. He's already said he didn't like me. I'm sure that's firmly moved over to the hatred column. I would expect nothing less. He can join my family.

I'm aware of every second ticking by until an attendant seems to appear out of nowhere on silent feet.

"Mistress, His Highness requests your presence in his garden." Nodding solemnly, she steps over the glass doors leading to the garden.

Standing, I smooth my palms down my hips, trying to calm my nerves. I can already feel the perspiration prickling between my breasts and in my armpits. I already regret not taking the time to freshen up as I should have. Erroneously, I thought Hassan would bring my son to me immediately.

The much taller woman's shadow falls before us like an omen as she leads me through the private garden that spills from my rooms. Taking me through a hidden path I would have never found, she leads me through a dense thicket that is clearly known to few. Stopping before a dense wall of what looks like orange honeysuckle and smells similar she waits.

"Honey suckle grows here?" I ask to her back.

"Yes, Mistress. This is Cape Honey Suckle, though many kinds are grown or transplanted. The prince's grandmother had an affinity for them. This was her

favorite palace.”

Mutely I nod, trying to imagine having a favorite palace. Yes, I’m wealthy now, very close to being a billionaire in my own right, but having to sit on the floor sharing saltines with my younger sisters is not something I will ever forget.

The wall of honeysuckle springs open as another attendant steps back as we pass.

“I will await you here.” The woman who saw me this far says.

“I’m sorry I din’t get your name —” I start.

“Amari,” she answers hurriedly, her eyes darting to the attendant waiting. “You must not keep His Highness waiting.” Whispering with gentle admonishment she steps back.

Pushing the door closed, the waiting attendant nods ahead of me. “Follow me please, mistress.”

The silence of the garden is almost comforting if I was sure that the new woman who seems older and sterner wasn’t leading to my death. I know men like him, like FADE, his brother, Ghad and Flower’s husband, Akchiro don’t take slights easy. Never mind the grave insult of me keeping his son from him.

Chewing my bottom lip, I follow the woman onto a path similar to the one that led us here until it opens up into a grand courtyard. There is a huge fountain that is the centerpiece of the garden. It looks what I imagine paradise in heaven would be.

There are humming birds in a bath and small animals I’ve never seen outside a zoo frolicking and bounding over each other in the grass.

Attendants are feeding, massaging, and playing with them. A puppy, no, nothing so boring; Hassan has a baby gazelle and lynx in his back yard.

We approach the huge fountain and I hear Ayaan giggling. Rounding it, I see him standing on strong little legs before hisdaddy petting a sleek kitten. The kitten swats his arm as he tickles his long pointed ears.

Hassan doesn't bother to look up, but the moment Ayaan sees me, he's nearly tripping over himself to get to me.

"Mommy, mommy—" he squeals in happiness as I sweep him up in my arms.

Burrowing my head in his hair, I nearly weep from relief. Knowing my son's reaction would be one of immediate despair should I cry in front of him, I take the necessary moments I need to get myself together as I inhale his precious baby scent.

"Hey, my big man." Smiling as I pull back to meet his jade gaze, I search his face with care for any signs of distress. We are rarely away from each other. Which is why when it got to the two-hour mark, I started to worry. I make sure not more than two hours pass between me laying eyes on him.

"We will share a meal with our son," Hassan announces as a way of greeting me, I suppose.

He nods to the double doors, then motions for me to sit. No sooner than I do as he bids is the food being brought out by attendants.

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“Going on Bear Hunt?” I ask Ayaan, to which he nods excitedly. This is what I normally do any time I need to keep him busy while he’s waiting.

I can feel Hassan’s eyes on us, but I do my best to ignore him. Not letting his scrutiny bother me. I know he’s fascinated with his son just by looking on as Ayaan played with the cat someone cleverly took away. Warm towels are placed on the side of the thick blanket.

“Ayaan, come here son.” And without a second look, my baby scrambles from my lap and toddles over to Hassan. My heart squeezes when he brushes a soft kiss to his curls and washes his hands. More towels a place beside me. I follow, doing the same, taking my time to keep busy and not look at father and son toomuch. It’s like a dream and nightmare wrapped together in some twisted fever dream.

No sooner than I put the towel down is the food being served.

Fragrant dishes and porridge of honey and dates are placed in front of us.

“I read he has no allergies, is that correct?” Hassan asks in smooth tones.

“Yes, I had him tested since I developed an egg allergy when I got pregnant with him.” Not being able to meet his eyes, I keep my gaze on his powerful hands, securing the bib around Ayaan’s neck.

“Mommy eat, eat.” My happy baby scrambles back, coming to sit with me.

I feed him first. The porridge and dates make him hum and wiggle with joy. My baby

loves to eat. I give him morsels of baked chicken and soft, yeasty rolls with a honey butter topping.

“Yummy,” offering me a bite, he gives me a greasy little smile. I can’t help but to return.

Darting a quick glance at his father, I briefly wonder if Ayaan looks like him when he smiles. My chest squeezes when I see the longing in his face as he looks at us.

He catches me looking at him and it’s like a curtain drops over his features. All softness is wiped from his features. His gaze goes glacial as his regard lasers on me alone. There is no softness there. That only belongs to the baby we share.

“Ahem.” Clearing my throat, I push as much cheer into my voice as I can. “Do you want to give your daddy some?”

“Baba.” Comes the cold, cutting correction.

My gaze trips over to his. His mouth thins at the question in my eyes.

“We say, baba, here.” He clarifies with a coldness so diabolical that even Ayaan’s curly little head swivels around to look at him.

Soothing reassuring circles on my baby’s back, I say with soft reassurance, “Baba, it is. Honey, would you like to give your baba some?”

“Baba?” Turning back to me, he asks with uncertainty.

“Yes, baba.” Smiling, I nod to Hassan. “Yes, baba is hungry. Look how grumpy he got just for a second. He’s happy now, but still hungry. Would you like to share with Baba?”

“Baba, share?” he cries giddily. Moving to stand with a morsel of meat tightly held in his little fist, he goes over to Hassan, hope shining in his eyes.

The glimmer of a smile quirking the corners of an otherwise grim face is very much like the one I mused about earlier.

Seeming not minding the mess, Hassan scoops Ayaan up, gobbling up the messy food his son presses into his mouth with enthusiasm.

Eating the delicious array of food set before me I soak in the tableau of son and father bonding over a simple meal. I was scared to admit the dream I dared not have my entire pregnancy and since the birth of my son. Seeing it come true before my very eyes, regardless of circumstance, makes my heart nearly explode with joy.

Eventually they are done and Hassan seems to take more time than absolutely necessary cleaning them both up. Settling a dosing Ayaan in his lap, he pins me with a piercing gaze as I clean my hands with freshly presented towels.

“Now we will speak of about the repercussions of your actions.” Idly stroking our son’s curls, he rises in one fluid motion from the crossed seating position he was in.

Full and despite the hours of choreography, I still find myself struggling a little to rise. He looks down at me like a god from on high as I ungracefully come to stand before him.

Not bothering to wait beyond that small courtesy, he leads me out of the garden through the double doors flanked by two more fierce faced female attendants.

Walking through the expanse of the majestic suite, I follow him as he passes through the living area into a bedroom where a custom bed sits on a dais. Skirting around it, he enters another room off to the side. I follow him, curious as to where he’s taking

Ayaan.

The room we enter is a toddler's paradise. Life, like animals, line the walls. The Serengeti themed room is a delight. The wall mural is of thick grasses with various animals peaking through. National Geographic couldn't have captured the animals better. Birds seem to soar from the blue skies. Elephants are in the background and lions look to roam off in the distance. The motif is continued through the room. The bed is as if it's nestled in a tree with the bed enclosed in its leaf like pillows.

Turning in a slow circle, I marvel at the effort that went into the room and with my son's favorite things in the world. Ayaan has been on a serious animal kick since his first birthday.

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Watching Hassan place him in his new bed, I almost feel like I'm intruding on a special moment.

He bends to press a kiss on his head, then steps back to give me space to do the same.

Bending, I inhale his precious scent again and kiss his soft little cheek. My nose stings, and my throat threatens to close from this new reality my little baby gets to experience.

Rising, I see Hassan has already left the room.

I guess he can't wait to tear into me, I muse as I follow the path back out through to the main living area, pointedly ignoring the bed. I don't even allow myself to think of him and his fiancée sharing this bed. Ignoring the twist in my chest, I try not to think about what he does in the bedroom with his fiancée and other lovers. I speed up until I come face to face with the avenging angel standing before the seating area with his hands clasped behind his back like a disapproving teacher.

"You will explain yourself." Severity drips from every word. His face cut from stone and his eyes are chips of ice as his gaze rakes over me with an emotion akin to hatred and barely banked disgust. Something I'm very familiar with having seen it so much growing up.

"I found out I was pregnant a few months after that night when I had a check-up before the tour was to start." I have to swallow past the ache I thought I'd assuaged from the way he treated me that morning. First, making me believe I was something special, that what we experienced that night was magical, only to be told with

annoyed disdain that he belonged to another.

I take a breath and continue, “I can’t lie and say didn’t think about ending the pregnancy — I did all of two seconds when the doctor read the results to me. But, I’m grown. I have more than enough money to take care of Ayaan all on my own, so I decided to keep him and raise him alone. I had no intention of bothering you or intruding on your life.” Succinctly I give him the facts without all the sturm und drang of what really occurred like the crying, screaming and throwing up at not being pregnant but having a child I knew in my heart his father would never want. The man proudly said he couldn’t stand me.

“The fuck you mean you were going to keep him and raise him alone?” He grits out, his tone low and furious. A hot flush of anger rides high on his cheeks. “He’s my son.”

“And you are engaged. The marriage is in what, a couple months? I had to send my regrets. It didn’t seem right coming to the wedding of the man I fucked.” I shrug, watching rage fill his features.

“How is the bride to be and where is she, anyways?” Looking around expectantly, schooling my face to one of innocent wonder.

“She’s fine and not here,” he snaps, fury still riding him like a wave at high tide off the coast of my house in Malibu.

“Busy making wedding plans, I bet. I hear it’s going to be the wedding of the century. I hate to miss it,” I say with fake sadness.

“Don’t worry, you won’t.” Crossing his arms, another stoic mask drops over his face as he slowly blinks at me.

“This little visit has been nice, and I didn’t cut up when you had my flight diverted because I know it was shock finding out like this, but I’m going on tour. You’re already making me late for my show in Cairo—” I trail off at the slow shake of his head.

The air is dead between us. Tension draws a tight line as we regard one another. It’s in that moment I’m more than aware I have no power here. He’s a prince and I may as well be a pauper. I’m pretty sure those guards took my passport and my phone before they gave me back my bag.

“You’re not leaving here with my son, Lyric. Should you wish to once he becomes acclimated to his new home, you may. But understand this. In this country, by my faith and by my law my son belongs to me. There will be no shared custody. If you leave my country without my express permission, you will be blocked from ever entering again. You will never see Ayaan again. If you attempt to abscond with my heir, you will be killed on sight.”

Standing before him, I absorb the verbal pummeling he just gave me too shocked to do anything other than absorb the ruthless promise of his words.

Missing everything that transpires afterward until I realize attendant is guiding me out of the room.

“Lyric.” His voice is almost melodic in the haze of my shock.

Turning to face him I’m stunned by the smile most of all. His beautiful blazingly sinister smile.

“I do so hope you try.”

Chapter Six

BEST LAID PLANS

HASSAN

(Rabat, Morocco)

“You will explain yourself.” I eye the headline slammed on my desk the up to the fury etched across my father and sovereign’s face.

THE EMPRESS ABDUCTED BY CROWN PRINCE HASSAN AL RASHEED OF MOROCCO

“Is this true son?” My mother queries. Her deep brown eyes are big with concern and yet I watch as within seconds as she shrewdly pieces the events of the last few weeks together — my abrupt departure for Fez, me staying there until last night when I had meetings that could not be avoided nor delayed further and definitely not held at palace in Fez when my son is there.

My heart pangs at the thought of even leaving him this long but I promised him I’d be back to tuck him in tonight. Now seeing the news literally unfolded before me I don’t know if I will be able to but I’ll be damned if I don’t try.

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Which leads me to looking my parents straight in their eyes as I admit, “Lyric, gave birth to my child, a son — his name is Ayaan, last year without my knowledge. I found out when it hit the press and Khadijah showed me his picture.”

I let the news and its meaning sink in. “When I became aware of it I brought them here for their safety.” Steepling my fingers, I let the meaning of my words lie between us, saving them from any implication of wrongdoing.

“You’ve caused an international incident, son. This person,” my father points to name circled in the second paragraph of the article, “Prosper Shipmoore is insisting that Lyric was taken off her private plane and forced here against her will. Where is she, son?” Low intense words let me know that my father fears the worst. He more than anyone knows how ruthless I can be if I am wronged.

“Hassan—” my mother’s mournful voice beseeches me when I don’t answer.

I’ve let them meddle enough in my life by going through with this wedding when I’d rather continue my pursuits in America. Sadiq and I both knew he was more ill-suited for this role than I. He would have abdicated with the first sign of Lovie-Belle showing any type of distress, and since I’d been betrothed already I went along with it. However, I draw the line when it comes to Lyric and my son. I will deal with her as I choose.

“They are both safe.” Is all I give them. I don’t need my father’s advisors in my business.

“We have to get ahead of this you understand?” Umm, says in a gentle tone that has

my father shooting her a hard look. I know he wants to yell but he'd never do so in front of his beloved.

"The press are already outside our doors. Poor Khadijah has been inundated with calls since the news broke. She is so bewildered and upset. Her father sent for her, to take her away from this circus." Umm says forlornly. She loves Khadijah like a daughter.

"How do you know this boy is your son?" Skepticism laces every hard word Baba utters.

"See for yourself. The first picture Khadijah showed us I barely paid attention to it thinking it was gossip." Umm hands Baba her phone. Eyes wide, then mouth pressing into a grim line he states. "To secure the succession the council wide demand a DNA test."

Nodding, I meet his unwavering gaze. I had one administered the night I retrieved them from the plane knowing this demand would eventually come.

"To mitigate any further problems you need to bring Lyric and Ayaan here so we may meet them. We will then take a few questions from the press and will have to make statement substantiating your claims. That is the only way. The US ambassador is already at my door demanding to know what is going on. He says she's a Goodwill Ambassador for the UN and a personal friend of the president. I must be able to tell him something. You have three hours." He sweeps from the room with my mother hot on his heels trying to soothe his distemper.

"Fuck." Slamming my hand down on the newspaper, I crush it in my fist.

The fact that I kept my cool when Baba mentioned Bishop and Porter Shipmoore's sister, Prosper was a feat in itself. Beautiful and a total fucking nuisance that is what

she is — at least to affluent men whose wives had chosen to leave them. Her, I will deal with at another time. The fight I now have is with another difficult woman.

“The prince and Mistress Lyric are here, Your Highness.” I look up to Fariq stepping inside my office. He’s pushed the door closed, so we won’t be overheard. The palace is a notorious hub of gossip. Though many of the staff are loyal and we rarely have leaks, Lyric, being who she is, will throw all protocol out the window.

I’d not left my office since my parents left earlier. I had too many pieces to move on this chessboard of a situation. Bin Saladin has created a wrinkle that cannot be avoided. Only true heirs of Bin Saladin will be recognized. A neat little addendum Khadijah’s father added that at the time I had absolutely no problem agreeing to. All of that is moot now. The man is entirely too prideful. He will take this situation as an affront to his daughter. Already my assistant is fielding calls from him.

Before I make the decision and only true solution I have at this point thanks to the damnable meddling of Prosper Shipmoore, I must speak to the man and see if he will at least see reason.

“Has she been briefed?” I ask him. He along with his brother and mine knows all my secrets. They were there the night to greet Lyric when she came off the elevator. If need be they can attest to the fact she stayed all night and well into the next day. DNA will not be enough when politics and the succession is at play.

“Yes, on the way here. She’s requested to have Fi come to do her hair and make-up for the news conference.” His expression tells me nothing but the familiarity he’s using with the friend is enough.

“You will have to make sure they do not collude. Who can we trust in the women’s section?” His mouth presses into a firm line, his jaw clenches as he looks away and nods.

“Aliah,” he says offering his sister’s name without hesitation.

“She will be Lyric’s mu’allima. I have to have my most trusted people around my son.” He stiffens in attention at this praise and follows by giving me the rare salute.

“You honor my entire family, Your Highness.” He bows in gratitude. Lyric is the mother of the future king, so this is a great honor. It matters not if she’s my wife. Being part of her household elevates every person in it.

After acknowledging his gratitude, I turn to the other task at hand— calling the father of the woman whose dreams I’m about to crush.

“CanI talk to you for a moment?” Lyric looks up to me with solemn eyes filled with hope as soon as I stride into the room. She’s looks like the stuff of dreams. Her hair cascading down her curvy petite frame in deep lavish ebony waves. Though I loved touching her natural hair, the magnificence of the wig does justice to the occasion. She’s dressed in the American fashion but the light green wrap dress is very respectful of the traditions of my people. The colors match Ayaan’s princely attire, though he’s dressed in traditional Moroccan fashion with a tunic and pants.

“No.” Stepping past her, I scoop Ayaan up from where he’s playing on the floor.

“Baba.” He smiles, throwing his arms around me.

I feel Lyric shifting behind me. “Hassan, please. I need?—”

“Now is not the time. We have to meet my parents, then have this press conference.” Keeping my voice level as I can so I don’t upset our son. The look I give her is fierce enough to have her take a step back. All this shit is her fault. Bin Saladin is furious and his daughter is heart broken. He would not listen to reason, as I knew he wouldn’t. No man of his stature would allow his daughter to be second to someone

they feel falls so far short of her in status. He raged for the better part of an hour. However, when he would not agree to amend the marriage contract to allow for Ayaan, I had no choice but to end the entire engagement. The statement to the press has already been announced. Moving quickly to offset any designs, the council or my parents have, I acted alone.

No sooner than the news hit did they hurry back into my office, making demands. I don't take well to being told what to do, so I informed them unless they were willing to wait for my sister who is still in college to marry then they needed to give me the space and time to navigate this situation as I see fit.

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“Too bad.” She grits, determination making her even more stunning, as she steps back into the space as if she’d never moved from it. “My best friend is very upset and afraid. I want her here with me and Ayaan. He misses her too.”

On cue, my son calls out “Fi.” Kicking and squirming to be put down. As soon as I acquiesce, he rushes over to where Aliah is ushering the woman into the room.

“Oh honey,” she bends low to hug him. “Fi has to go, but I will see you real soon.”

“See, I told you,” Lyric hisses, moving to pass me.

I block her path. “She’s lucky to still breathes, as are you. Your actions determine for how long for both of you.”

Even under what I’ve heard by the models I used to date call the no makeup look she’s wearing, I see her face ashen at my words.

“You’d break Ayaan’s heart like that?” Shaking her head in disbelief, she looks aghast.

“He’s barely one. He won’t even remember either of you,” I simply shrug. “You were willing to let him go without knowing me.”

Rounding on me she skewers me with a rage filled gaze. “Then why did he know you were his daddy as soon as he saw you, dumbass dummy?” Throwing her hand up dismissively, she turns, striding over to Ayaan and Fi.

After the two women hug and one final kiss to my son from Fi, I'm left with a mad as hell woman and a sad little boy.

"Ah, is this Ayaan?" Turning to the entrance of the suite I see eager wariness etched across my parents' faces.

The meeting was at best awkward. Lyric shed all the Empress trappings and was just a nervous new mom meeting the parents of her child's father. My parents, ever the diplomats, greeted her warmly, though apprehensively. Baba couldn't seem to decide if he wanted to be the monarch or the granddad.

"This is jadd, and jadda," I tell Ayaan the names for grandparents in my language. Looking up, I see tears glistening in Umm's eyes and Baba's are a little glassy too.

Anger that they didn't get to hold and rock him when he was first born eats and me. Watching Lyric look on with hesitant hope only makes that anger hotter. She denied them. She denied all of us. I should have been there to see my son born into this world. I haven't got a good answer from her why she thought to keep my son from me or what she thought she'd accomplish doing that dumb shit. She's going to learn that fucking with me is a mistake.

Looking away, feeling the muscle tick in my jaw, I glance down at my watch. "It's time."

All heads pop up at that moment. Masks fall into place to present the regal family our people have come to expect. My parents — no longer the doting grandparents but the king and queen of this country. Lyric seems to take her cues from them. She's not the biggest star in the world right now, but the mother of a prince and she takes that mantle like she was born to it. Not sure why that makes me chuffed with pride, but it does.

Lyric falls into step behind me as previously instructed. Baba and Umm lead us. The entire household lines the corridor leading to the conference room, watching our little entourage walk to where the press assembles.

Entering the room, I shield Ayaan from the flash of cameras shooting off in rapid succession. Following a step or two behind my parents, I notice how they arranged the seats. Three in front, with one to the rear of mine.

Pausing, I nod to Fariq. "Adjust the seating, so that we are all together."

"That is not protocol," he murmurs the needless reminder.

"This is unprecedented and aired live around the world. Placing her behind me would be seen as backward and disrespectful. She's not some girl from a village no-one heard of. She is the Empress. Now see to it that is done."

Pressing his lips in a firm line, he goes to do my bidding. Walking ahead of us, he smoothly places the chair beside mine as my parents take their seats. Lyric and I follow.

Pausing, I wait as she takes hers before I sit, adjusting my son in my lap.

"Baba," Ayaan pleads, looking to me with bright, green eyes filled with worry, then to the crowd and back to me.

"Shh, it's okay handsome boy," Lyric soothes, "Mommy and Baba are right here."

The immediacy with which she calms him is like a magical balm.

My father's press secretary steps up to a dais off to the side to speak as per palace protocol. No one stands in front of the royal family.

“Ladies and gentleman the national and international press core, thank you for assembling here today for the announcement of Prince Ayaan ben Hassan Al Rasheed, first and only son of Prince Hassan ben Kareem Al Rasheed.” The uproar from this makes Ayaan flinch. “Baba,?” Small hands grab at my lapels. Helplessly, I watch fat tears fill his eyes and roll down his cheek. He whimpers with fear at the cacophony of clicks and shouts ensuing from the assembly.

“Let me have him.” Lyric’s already reaching for him. As much as it pains me to do it, I know she is better equipped to take care of him in these types of situations.

“Quiet please,” the press secretary says over and over again, to no avail.

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I stand. I can feel my parents' stunned expression on me at this breach of protocol. But they don't see or choose not to acknowledge Lyric trying to calm my frightened son.

"You will cease or this event will be canceled. You are upsetting my son," I snap to the room at large, noting all the bad actors. One would think they're dogs being thrown raw meat.

The rooms quiets. I take my seat.

"Ahem," the moderator inquires with look my father's way and begins after he receives a nod, "We shall begin with the questions. You may ask one question and have a follow up."

"Yes?" he motions to the crowd and a woman stands.

"Your Highness, when did you find out about the child?" She gives Lyric a look of speculative disdain.

"What matters is the kingdom has been blessed with another heir." I smile at her.

"Are we sure he is, in fact, your heir? Has there been a DNA test to confirm?" Her followed up is expected, still I can feel Lyric bristling beside me.

"It's confirmed." I don't give more details than necessary, having done this for the better part of my life. Give them nothing to run with. Nothing to pin you down with. If I confirm a test was given, they will demand to see it. Plastering the results for the

world to see. I will not make a spectacle of my child for their amusement. He already has enough to bear as my heir.

The reporter sits and there is a flurry of more questions, each more targeted and accusatory towards Lyric. Glancing over, I do a quick check, noticing Ayaan has fallen asleep and Lyric's soft humming has ceased. Her eyes remain locked on his sleeping face as though concentrating on him will block out all she is facing.

"Your Highness, how do you know this is not some elaborate trap to make the Empress a Queen?" The inquiry is so disrespectful, my head snaps around to the man who'd dare to insult the mother of my child.

"You will apologize immediately." My tone is low. I, more than anyone, know this was not a trap. If she shied away from telling me because this is what she feared, then this ignoramus justified her actions with his heinous words.

Jhori Bin Saladin has released a statement saying that you have caused great dishonor to his house, so you could legitimize your son at the expense of his daughter. He demands that you set aside the concubine and honor the contract. He is calling the council and other governing provinces to demand the wedding take place and that you set aside the child and his mother. What is your response, Your Highness."

I rise from my chair then. Turning, I take Ayaan, tucking him into my neck, holding him close with one arm. Taking Lyric's hand, I help her rise to stand beside me. My parents rise and come to stand. We are united as a family before the press and all who have assembled. Then I announce to the press core and the world at large.

"Rest assured, there will be a wedding and I will not set aside my child, Prince Ayaan Ben Hassan Al Rasheed. He is my heir and successor. His brothers and sisters will be my also heirs and successors. I will marry his mother, Lyric to ensure this."

The small gasp beside me is the only thing that resonates in the chaos that follows.

Chapter Seven

I THINK HE WANTS TO MARRY ME

LYRIC

“I know the fuck you didn’t just tell everybody in the whole wide world that we are getting married.” I seethe at the fucking tyrant I not only gave myself to but had a baby with. Till this day I don’t know what fucking delusion I was operating under, thinking he’d just let us go, let us live in anonymity and leave us in peace while he went on with his perfect bride handpicked for him. Regret eats at me like flesh-eating bacteria, as I stare at this man, waiting for him to explain himself.

“I did because we are,” Responding simply, he looks down at me with stoicism bleeding from him in bland waves. Like he can’t even be bothered to give me a clear answer. We stand pretty much in the same place as before when I asked if we could speak. That would have been the perfect time to let me know his plans. Hell to ask me to marry him. Not that I’d say yes after he’s kidnapped us.

He acts as if he owns the world which in some respects he does in this kingdom. He’s next in line to the throne. Rumors are his father is more than ready to step aside which is why the marriage to Khadijah was so important. Yet, he stands here like disrupting all our lives in nothing but a minor inconvenience to him. Fuck the rest of us. Now, he’s looking at me dispassionately. Like I’m the one causing the fuss.

This after his parents railed at him for disrupting their plans and the world order with this bizarre announcement.

“There must be a DNA test immediately before anyone on the council can stop the

precedings.” His mother said shooting me sympathetic glance as if to apologize for the test having to be done.

“Of course that is the only way.” The king nodded in agreement a little too fast for my taste as if I’ve been going around trolling for Black men with green eyes, so I can pass my baby off as the heir to his kingdom. Throwing them all a vicious look, I stormed away from their little family affair not caring when they slipped into Arabic to continue their argument.

Leaving them to it, I went in to sit with Ayaan reading to him. He was so tired from all the activity of the day but it was too late for a nap and too early for him to go to bed. He was already an early riser — something he did not get from me. And since he stopped nursing thanks to the tour starting his sleep schedule no longer matched mine.

Still there was nothing for it. I read to him. Replacing what few words I could with Arabic, noting that I needed to get a tutor or I wouldn’t even be able to communicate with my son after a while.

Soon my little man was drifting off. His long lashes casting shadows over his soft cheeks making my heart hitch at the sight.

He is beyond beautiful. The splitting image of his father with a little me sprinkled in, like his fuller lips and a slightly darker skin tone.

“Lyric,” Looking up, I see the queen standing just inside the door-way.

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“I came to say, Good Night, but I see he’s already asleep. May I look in on him?”
The plaintiveness of her tone strikes me.

Not having my mother around was a choice I purposefully made because I wanted Rob no where near my son. The longing I see in her eyes is something I’ve never experienced before for me or my baby.

“Sure.” Moving to stand, I give her room to look in the toddler bed Hassan procured.

“He’s so beautiful.” Touching the soft down of his curls she looks on at him lovingly.

After a few moments of silently gazing on him, she turns back to me. “We did not mean to offend you. It’s evident from just looking at Ayaan that he is Hassan’s child. The reason we are insisting on the DNA is so there will be irrefutable proof and he will be protected. It is important that you understand the machinations that go on in a royal court. We must stand as a united front.”

Slipping back into the mantle of queen, she crosses her hand over her middle, stating all this.

“I am not your subject. I didn’t agree to marry Hassan. He’s never even spoken to me about any of this beforehand. Which he could have done at anytime.” Pulling myself up, I match her energy if not her much taller height. Empress mode is fully activated.

“I would like to speak to my country’s ambassador,” I tell her smoothly.

“Of course, you are free to speak to whomever you wish. But know this, young lady.

You are here as a guest at the benevolence of my son. You have no rights in this country. If Ayaan proves to be my grandson, which I am assured he is, then he is his father's sole heir and will be afforded the protection of the crown prince. So, if you demand to leave and not follow through with Hassan's wishes, I'm not sure what will happen." Her words hit me like a blow to my chest.

"Y-you're a mother?—"

"Yes, I am. That is why I am telling you to think about your choices very carefully and don't act rashly. I have never seen Hassan this out of sorts. He was the calm twin. His actions today are anything but calm." Her eyes dart to the door and I see two figures standing there.

"His Majesty must be ready to retire." Stepping away from me, she goes to join her husband who also seems to have that same look of longing on his face.

"He's sleeping but you are welcome to look in on him, sir." Knowing my son couldn't be in safer hands, I go back into the adjoining suite. Food has been laid out on low tables. More than enough for just me. Hassan is over by the doors, speaking in hushed tones to the guy who took Fi.

I watch them until I hear a gentle clearing go the queen's throat. There's an admonishment there as if I'm eaves dropping. Surely she knows I don't have a command of their language yet.

Turning, I quirk an unapologetic eyebrow and her and the dispassionate king.

"We will take our leave. I will have my secretary contact Aliah to schedule visits that are amenable to you." Queen mode again. I wonder if it's for her husband who clearly doesn't want me as a daughter-in-law or if she's trying to bully me into letting them spend time with my baby. I'm not petty. I would never keep my child from his

family as long as they aren't abusive, which is why my mine are out of the question.

"That's fine." There's a visible relaxing on her shoulders when I smile my answer. The king nods a little too grudgingly. He's lucky my baby softened some of my feistiness.

Now they are gone and I'm left with this deranged motherfucker who thinks he can control my life.

"I will not marry you, Hassan." Shaking my head at him, I move away from him before I do something evil like smash this silver carafe against his big head.

"You may of course, refuse." Gaze tracking me like a panther. He takes a grape from the platter popping it into his mouth. "But the consequences of your refusal I've already told you. You'll never see Ayaan again. If the tour means so much to you, then do what you will. I, for one, can't wait for you to go." A cruel smile spreads across his face.

Slap after the vicious slap his words pummel me. Like I'm some dead beat who didn't want anything to do with my baby. Just like Rob made me believe about my real dad until I learned the truth. He died in Iraq. He was coming back for me and my mom after he deployed, but never got the chance.

Heat flames my face as I charge over to him, shoving his chest. He doesn't budge. Frustration licks at me. Hopelessness laughs in my face as I shove this unmovable monster with all my might.

I haven't even thought about the tour. I've missed two dates already and haven't spoken to FADE. The fallout is going to be enormous.

"It's not about that. You kidnapped me, you maniac." I shove and shove again until a

heavy hand whips out and grabs me by my throat. Slowly, he lifts his arm, stretching me to the tips of my toes.

“You will watch who the fuck you’re talking to woman.” Squeezing, he traps my arm. Clawing at his hands, I draw blood, trying to stop him, but he doesn’t let up. Losing breath fast, I flail, seeing stars dart behind my eyes. He gives me a little shake before tossing me on the sofa behind me.

Straddling me, he leans in, crowding me in on all sides, eyes blazing a rage of green fire. Smoothing my hair back from my forehead, his gaze searches my face as I gasp for air.

“Hear me when I say this, Lyric. I will honor you in all things as the mother of my sons.” He strokes my hair again before grabbing a handful of my ten grand buss down, tugging my head back. “If you ever disrespect me again or seek to lay hands on me in any fashion but one of pleasure and adoration, I. Will. Break. Your. Fucking Neck. I’m not a little boy, or one of your himbo friends. I’m a fucking prince.” Sliding off me, he stands looking down with contempt, his body rippling with unspent aggression.

I don’t look away. I can’t. With every breath he seethes, the more riveted I become. He could have crushed my windpipe, but all he did was capture my breath for a few seconds.

Inadvertently, my eyes rake across his body. He’s breathing like he’s run five miles. Then my eyes snag on the heavy protrusion distorting the smoothness of his trousers. His dick is thick and hard pressed against the fabric. Wetting my lips, I watch it stretch further under my gaze as if in answer to the need wracking my body. My muscles clench at the memory.

“You need something, Lyric?” His voice is sensuous and mocking.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:45 am

Looking up, I don't miss the malice in his gaze. He's laughing at me.

"I'm fine, thanks." Mustering as much nonchalance as I can, I cross my arms over my budding nipples. Looking away from him.

A firm hand cups my chin, lifting my face towards him. Still, I refuse to look at him. His grip is unyielding, conveying all that I've come to know about this man. He can break me anytime he chooses.

"You will look at me, Lyric. I won't marry a coward, no matter how beautiful she is," he murmurs quietly. Shocked surprise has me meeting his jade green eyes, to see he means it. I can smell the heady scent of his masculine cologne. Everything about him drips luxury and menace and my weak ass body can't help but respond.

"You're lying." Eyes dipping down as if he can see the nipples I'm desperate to hide, not to mention the wetness forming between my thighs. His gaze lingers for long moments before lifting to meet mine again.

"I bet if I checked, I find you dripping for me. Isn't that so, jameela?" Swallowing, I meet his gaze, saying nothing. I refuse to let him win in this. He's taken so much from me, already.

"So be it." Dropping his hand from my chin, he grabs the ties to my dress. Slapping his hands away, I scramble back into the cushions.

"Oh, you're playing now?" Huffing in exasperation, he grabs my ankle, dragging me forward.

Something sick drops into the pit of my tummy. “Hassan, no.” I don’t know if it’s the panicked fear in my voice or the way I start fighting him, but he immediately steps back.

In the ensuing silence, I scramble back again, pulling pillows round me in a protective cage determined to shut and this entire nightmare out.

“This little light of mine. I’m going to let it shine. This little light of mine. I’m going to let it shine. This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.”

“Lyric.” I’m almost done with the song by the time his voice registers. “Lyric.” My name a litany on his lips.

My gaze reaches his through the pillow fort I barely recall erecting. My fortress of solitude always during the after when I had to go into myself. The only place I had that was safe.

Maybe for the first time he sees me. I mean, really see me. And I don’t like that shit one bit.

“Can you leave now?” My voice is pleading with anger — small, so very small. I have a bubble in my throat like it’s clogged up really bad. I need Fi, but she’s been gone for hours and by the time she gets back here, everything will be fine.

Not that he’d let me have her. My only friend. I’m alone in this place. I have no one here for me. I have to be here for Ayaan. Just like I had to be there for Song, Kadence, and Harmony. I don’t have time to collapse in on myself. I just need a moment. A moment of peace. Humming to myself, I wait for him to leave.

“Yes, I can.” Solemn words reach me, but I don’t bother looking up from my haven. I

just need him to be gone.

But he doesn't and I just want to sink into myself. I feel so rubbed raw, like I've been scoured by a wire sponge laced with acid. Burying my face into my bent knees, I rock myself, trying to reach for a safe place.

"Lyric," there is a sternness in his voice now. So much so I dare not refuse him. I meet the banked darkness in his eyes. "I will never take what you do not freely give me. I promise you that." His stare is unwavering and I know he means it.

After a long moment, I nod.

Then he dips down to his hunches. He's so tall, I can still meet his gaze over the pillows.

The muscles tick in his jaw even before his mouth moves. His words are low, this promise much darker, and I know he's going to keep every word. "One day I will ask you who hurt you and you will tell me. Then I will kill them."

With that vow, he rises smoothly to his feet, leaving me in my safe place.

Chapter Eight

AFTERNOON DELIGHT

HASSAN

"Your Highness, Mistress Khadijah has asked to speak with you." Looking up from the plans of the new housing that has been just approved of the revision of the housing project that we are constructing in a rural community that will include school, hospital and other vital services my father has long fought for only to run into

opposition at every turn. He however is not willing to go the lengths I will when I want something done. I have very little patience for those with more than they need trying their best to horde or worse exploit those who are less fortunate. I will bring all these motherfuckers to heel or they will die begging for my mercy.

“Tell her I will join her shortly.” Standing, I inform the attendant as I move from my desk to step into my private bathroom to take care of my needs and give myself a hard once over. Looking anything but regal the first time you see your ex-fiancee after you spoiled her life long dream is intolerable.

“Habi—” she cuts herself off when she sees me approaching. A soft tan blush stealing across her face in the most adorable way. Khadijah is a beauty. Stunning in every way. Pity the only feelings I ever had for her were always more familial, never sexual.

“Do not worry yourself.” Clasp my hands behind my back I watch as several emotions play across her countenance.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:45 am

“Forgive me, Your Highness,” she begins gravely but stops when I raise my hand.

“Khadijah, we will always remain friends if that is your wish.” Watching as her shoulders visibly relax I take a step closer. “Never apologize. None of this is your fault. It’s mine. I already settled the bride price and included the stipulation that it is yours solely to do with as you please. There is nothing you cannot do in this world. Don’t feel like you have to rush into anything. I will happily assist you in any way.” Dipping my head by way of apology I cover my heart in a gesture of contrition.

“I know you, Hassan. You have been more than generous. My father was somewhat mollified. He is why I’m here. He insisted that I come here today to get you to relent.” Shrugging, a little she turns worried brown eyes on me. “He hinted heavily that I should- should—” her face flushes hot as a crimson coal. “I would never.” She hurries to add. “Our friendship and my love of Amani would never allow me to act in such a way. Plus, I saw you with Lyric the other day on T.V. Seeing the way you look at her. I knew then I never had a chance and I told my father as much.”

Her earnestness makes me bite back the scoff threatening to burst free. I guess the little production we put on made an impression on the most important person to see it. If Khadijah was so inclined she could at any moment seek to force the marriage either through the courts or through some nefarious means in the palace. She’s been a resident here for most of her years and she has many allies in the halls. Probably more than me, since I’ve only returned to take the reins from my father, who is more than happy to focus on philanthropy.

It’s time to take on the role I was born into. I can’t let anything so petty as feelings distract me.

“I owe you a great debt. You must always think of us as your friend.” Every word is spoken with the fervor of me knowing there was none I wouldn’t destroy who tried to keep my son from me, I’d hate it to be her and I am grateful she had the good sense and loyalty not to heed her father’s guidance which is a fete in itself because actions such as the one she’s doing is simply not done. But I know she means more to her father than his ambition. He won’t disown her or beat her. Still, I say in a lowered tone. “You can always come to me if things become difficult.” The smile she gives me in return is sparkling.

“Hassan,” I have no choice but to catch her when she launches herself to my arms. “You are as awesome as my brothers. Thank you, thank you. I wish you every happiness. You have to promise to ask Lyric to sing at my next wedding.” She cajoles buzzing a kiss on my cheek.

Chuckling, I pull away looking down at her. “I promise.”

“Farewell friend,” stepping away she gives me a soft wave before leaving me in standing in the garden, my gaze lasers in on the point on the other side of leading from consorts wing.

Lyric is standing there and despite the distance there is no mistaking she saw the kiss.

Her back isto me when I enter her suite. Her body is trembling with rage. Petite shoulders vibrating with slight tremors and she tries to get her emotions under control. Puzzlement spirals through me as I try to find her reasoning. It’s obvious by her actions there is no lingering affection for me from the nightwe shared. Why else would she have been so cavalier about withholding the knowledge of my son from me?

Just thinking on it irritates the fuck out of me.

“Lyric,” Biting out her name, I stop just short of her vibrating form.

“What?” Whirling around she snaps. Then taking a step back she shakes her head, eyes hotter than the Sahara then raises her hand stopping me before I can utter words. “Never mind Your Highness,” saying the moniker like it is an epithet she sneers, “I don’t need your gaslighting, telling me I didn’t see what I clearly saw.”

Pivoting on slippered feet she moves to leave, dismissing me from her presence.

“You can go,” she wave negligently like I’m nothing, like I’m not the one running this shit.

Snatching her little ass back I look down into those expressive orbs flaming with hatred for me.

“And exactly what did you see?” Not really curious, more because she seems jealous. From what I’ve seen actresses try to emote for more than a dozen years — she’s hurt too. I need to know why.

“You taking advantage of an inexperienced girl.” She hurls the accusation at me with so much disgust I almost cringe.

“She wanted to say goodbye. I owed her at least that.” This gives the harridan pause for all of ten seconds.

“Oh, at least there is someone you think you owe answers to instead of taking decisions out of their hands, forcing marriage on them. Kidnapping and disrupting years of hard work.” Biting her bottom lip to cut off more words she tugs. I let her go.

Staring her down as I seethe, “You mean like you not telling me about my son?”

Lifting her head she gives me stiff nod. “I guess you think all of this—” waving to the room at large she pins me with a look, “is justified by a child you never wanted.”

“You don’t know what the fuck I wanted because you didn’t give me a chance to know about him.” Teeth clenched I ground out feeling heat on the back of my neck. How dare she judge me. “Now we’ll never know will we? You took that from me and the whole first year of his life.”

A mean little smirk quirks the corner of her mouth as she looks at me in a way that seems to size me up and find me lacking.

“I know what you wanted. What men like you always want — no responsibility. To do your dirt without any of the filth coming back to cling to your bespoke suits. You’ll go to any length not to have your problems exposed to the public. I have my own life. I don’t need you, Hassan. I chose to keep my baby for me. He’s mine. I didn’t need to consult you. You were engaged, remember? Something you failed to tell me. One night, that was all.” She shoves away from me throwing a wicked laugh over her shoulder at me, “Hell, I barely remembered it until the mandatory pregnancy test came back before my tour saying I was pregnant. It took me a half a day to even piece it together. Blame it on the Remy.” She gives a rueful chuckle, “That could be a song, lemme get my notebook.”

Fascination, disbelief, anger then resolve coalesce down to the bone and sinew of my being as I stare in awe of this little lying ass motherfucker trying to convince me, as she wonders off into her bedroom, that she didn’t remember the night that has me jacking my dick on a daily basis.

I have no choice but to follow.

“Oh yeah?” My voice sounds almost subhuman as the lock clicks ominously behind me.

“Ha—”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:45 am

“Uh-uh, lil’ mama,” shaking my head smiling a little because that is exactly what she is — my lil’ mama. “Seems like you need a little help remembering how we made our son, jameela.”

“Nah, I’m good. He’s here now,” she shrugs, clutching her purple notebook between her arms and luscious breasts like it will protect her or some shit like that.

She’s rooted to the spot as I stroll lazily over to where she stands beside the overstuffed queen bed I had dressed in the colors she favors, pink and purple.

She has on a nearly diaphanous lounge set that’s popular among the ladies of our set when they lounge at home. It flows yet still manages to hug every supple curve. The material dips in at her waist, revealing a little stripe of her skin where she has a diamond belly ring. That wasn’t there before and I’m envious I haven’t seen it until now. What other changes have I missed in her body besides the obvious one of her blossoming with my child? I resolve to plant my seed in her again. This time I won’t miss a moment.

Her breath flutters against my skin. I notice the pulse fluttering like the delicate beat of a hummingbird’s wings at her throat.

“You said you could barely remember,” I tease, plucking the notebook out of her hand, and placing it on the nightstand behind her. I hear a soft hitch when my shoulder brushes her left breast as I lean past her to toss it on the side table.

“See, I can’t have that now can I — my woman saying she can’t remember my loving,” I tsk, shaking my head. Reaching forward, I stroke her cheek. Her skin is as

smooth as I remember. “Kisses forgotten?” Thumb sliding over plumb luscious lips, I groan, thinking of how they felt against mine. How they felt wrapped around my dick.

Just thinking about how she sucked me deep down her hot little throat has my come pearling at the head of my length.

“We can’t have that now, can we?” Taking her lips, catching her gasp, I cover her, consuming every inch of her mouth. I devour. Unbelievably, beautifully, she yields. She tastes like the morning tea of mint. Mouth wet, I know her pussy’s wetter. She tastes like mine. She is. Soon she will have no choice but to remember everything we do because if it takes every day of the rest of our lives I will remind her to whom she belongs.

For all her denials, she didn’t hesitate to kiss me back. In fact, she gets on her tip toes, pressing her plump little body against mine.

Pulling back, allowing a small smile to spread across my face, I look down in to those luminous brown pools filled with desire.

“I-I’m not your woman,” she stutters, the umber flush stealing across her cheekbones, screaming her deception. Her fists are balled tightly, trying to hide her need.

Ignoring her lie, I duck my head, taking the nipple pressing against the fabric into my mouth. I suck deep, pulling the harden little nub deep into my mouth. Once the material is saturated, I lean back to look at my handy work. Now her fingers spasmodically grip my arms, telling me everything I need to know. I dive back down, taking the other nipple, sucking, tasting. Sweet nectar meets my tongue. My dick throbs almost to bursting. I suck more, trying to draw more out to taste.

“Fuck, you taste even better than before. My son made you ever more delicious. I bet

that pussy is just as good.” Glancing up, I notice she’s biting those lovely lips so hard she’s drawing blood.

“Uh-uh, we’re not hurting ourselves.” Tugging her lip free, I cover her mouth with mine, sucking away the hurt.

A soft moan escapes her, still she doesn’t move, doesn’t say stop. Her eyes say it all. She wants this. Tomorrow may be different, but right now she wants what only I can give.

More than happy to oblige if for no other reason than to prove to myself that night was not a figment of my imagination, I kneel.

“Little liar.” She’s drenched for me. Pulling back, I meet her pensive gaze. “My woman is wet for me.”

“N—” the lie dies on her tongue as I dip mine between her pussy lips. I won’t tolerate any more lies between us. The piquant pleasure of her taste is a delectable bouquet on my tongue. Inhaling, I take in the scent and the taste of her. I could taste her pussy all day. My dick kicks when she tilts those bountiful hips, pushing her pussy into my mouth.

“Hell yeah, give me that motherfucker, lil’ mama.” I growl, gripping her juicy ass, drawing her further into my mouth. I need more. Have to get more and I can’t get at her like I want through the material of the lounge pants thin as they are.

Setting back on my hunches, I stare at the fat ass pussy print pressing against the material. Fuck if I don’t want to take a picture just so I can occasionally look at it throughout the day.

“Let me see this pretty ass pussy you’re teasing me with.” Reaching her waist, I tug

the material down, helping her step out of the pants.

Returning, I notice the scar peaking out beneath the curve of her soft tummy.

“What’s this?” I trace the slightly raised tissue just above her pubic bone.

She stills. Her hand comes to rest beside mine. “It’s from the C-section. Dr. Muhammad said Ayaan was too big to fit through my cervix.”

Something twists in my heart as her words register.

Leaning forward, I kiss the place she’s covering, pressing my lips against her hand. With a gentle pressure, I move her hand away so I can lay kisses along the line of her belly.

“Thank you so much for giving me a son, jameela,” I whisper up into her guarded expression. “You won’t have to go through anything alone again.”

She must believe me because her hands touch my curls with a reverence I’ve never felt from another.

“You deserve to be worshipped. Will you let me?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:45 am

Her mouth opens and closes. She swallows. Then, after a beat, she nods.

Using my fingers, I open her to me. Her turgid clit stands out, demanding attention. Covering her, I suck it, drawing it into my mouth. Her fingers spear into my hair, holding me while she rides my face like a seasoned equestrian. Swirling, laving, lashing until I feel her legs tremble, I take her pussy with a ruthlessness to not only prove a point but to brand myself onto her soul. I'll be damned if she denies an experience with me again. I couldn't forget her, so why should she be able to form that lie without consequences?

"Ohmygoodness," she keens, coming hard against my mouth. Her hands are like a vise gripping my the sides of my head as she grinds her hot little pussy against me. Reveling in her taste, the heady sensation of her dripping mound against my lip and the pinpricks of pain as her fingers tighten with every wave of the orgasm I'm giving her. I can't help the come dripping from the tip of my dick in anticipation of finally having her again.

Gripping her hips, I pick her up, turning, then tossing her onto the bed. Dragging her legs over my shoulders, I burry my face into the plump flesh, begging for my adoration again. I can't get enough of this woman. Like a willing acolyte, I worship her the way the mother of my heir deserves. She spreads so beautifully for me and I know that night in California was not just one of dreams. No, it wasn't a lark, it created a miracle — our son. What we experienced that night was real. My heart kicks like a beast as I tongue her, knowing that this moment can be the same. We can create another miracle, hell as I taste the delectable nectar spilling just for me, I know we can create blessing after blessed miracle every time I breed her. I make it my mission, my ministry if you will to keep her filled with my seed for the foreseeable

future.

Delving my tongue, I fuck deep as I can, licking her sweet spasming walls. Her pussy does its best to suck me into its tight recesses. Pushing in a long finger, I feel how tight she is. Just as tight, if not tighter, than the first time I took her. Her fat little pussy is not only divinely plump, but snug as a motherfucker. Stroking her clit, I work her slit with my tongue, letting her fuck my face with abandon.

“Please, please,” panting she pleads, begging for the mercy only I can bring.

“Uh-uh,” pressing a teasing kiss on her clit I murmur, “I have to make sure you remember this time. I don’t want you wondering how this baby was made, Lyric.” My voice hardens as I flip her over, bringing her up to her hands and knees.

Reaching down, I have to squeeze my dick with the pressure that would break a man’s neck so I won’t shoot jets of come all over that juicy ass that’s on display for me now.

Her pussy pokes out, begging. I kneel again, going face deep into her ass, licking her from slit to ass.

“Hassan,” she screams as I eat her ass and pussy, tasting every inch of what’s mine for a lifetime. Holding her still, I don’t relent. Not when she comes the first or the second time. So fucking sweet. I’m feasting like the hedonist I am and I don’t want to stop.

I follow her down when she collapses. Turning her to her side, I ease inside. Even after all the times she came for me, her pussy’s grip nearly makes me spend.

“Damn, Lyric,” Pulling her tight against me, I cup her breast with one hand and cover her mound with the other hand. “Thispussy is so good, jameela. Better than before.

So fucking tight, sucking me in like you missed me.”

Bottoming out, thrusting deep, I take my time working in and out of her tight sheath. Dragging across the plushiest pussy I’ve ever had. “Did you miss this dick, Lyric?” She clenches hard in response, her body speaking even when she can’t or won’t give me an answer.

Not good enough. Pinching her nipples makes her gush for me. Slippery wet sounds fill the room as our bodies slap in sweet synchronization. “Answer me,” I order, fucking her deep.

“Yes,” her gasp catches on my tongue. I take her mouth, driving deep, filling her again and again as my fingers thrum her hard little clit. She opens her legs and clamps them back, sensations rioting through her, making her want to keep me close and push me away at the same time.

I don’t stop driving into her lush heat. I don’t want to stop. I doubt I can. Each drive takes us higher. Our bodies cling, release, only to come back together with hard surges. Her fingers dig into my flesh and I reward her in kind.

As my crisis approaches, I bury my mouth in the crook of her neck, taking the flesh there sucking, marking her as mine. I don’t give a fuck who sees it. I’ve already claimed her to the world now it’s time for her to accept it. She will wear my mark, my ring, I will breed her, she will bear me another child.

“You are mine you, understand?” I grit roughly in her ear. “Mine.”

“Hassan,” she pleads, shaking her head a little, trying to deny my words even as she comes for me again. I take her over edge following soon after determined more than ever to make it so.

Chapter Nine

THE LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE

LYRIC

Groggily peaking beneath the cloud of covers as he dresses, I take in the sight of the man who so thoroughly ravished me all day yesterday. Freshly showered, he looks amazing. He's in western dress for once. In a pristine black suit, blindingly white shirt, charcoal gray tie with diamond cufflinks. He looks relaxed and well rested, though neither of us got much sleep. He made love to me all day and night, then again right before he got up to shower. He gave me no respite, and I didn't ask for any. I want to bury myself deeper under the covers, but I'm no coward. I've always faced my mistakes. That is what yesterday and early this morning was — a mistake. My emotions are already all over the place. My body aches in places I didn't think were possible. I refuse to allow myself to feel any shame. I'm grown and... I don't even allow myself to finish the thought. Dang it. I folded like paper for Hassan just like the weak women I sing about never being, yet here I am letting His High-And-Mightiness have his way.

I'm trying to get used to this new normal. I've been putting on a brave face for Ayaan. So there really hasn't been time for me to just sit with everything that's happening and the repercussions that are happening to my life. So tearing myself up about a moment of weakness, I just won't do. It happened, it's over, that's all.

Hassan has ripped me away from everything and I'm the one who is going to have to deal with it. He may be untouchable ensconced in his palaces with all his power, but I still have life and legacy to maintain. People who depend on me for their livelihood. Then I let him — I don't even want to think about all that he did and I allowed. All I know is I need to get my act together, so I can find a way out of this situation before something irrevocable happens, like me getting pregnant again. He made it clear

that's his goal. To have me full with his babies. Walking around this palace year after year spitting out his kids like some broodmare. Ain't no fucking way.

"I can already see your mind working overtime." Tone nonchalant, he looks at me as he adjusts his tie.

Sitting up, I pin him with a glare. "And I wonder why that is?" I watch as he shoves his hands in his pockets and rock back and forth a little, quietly assessing me.

Then it seems as if he wraps himself in a shield of ice. The temperature of the room even seems to drop as he regards me. Gone is the passionate lover. In his place is the monarch. And I? I may as well be slowly serf for as much regard as he gives me as his next words so eloquently prove.

"I will make your excuses to our families this morning. However, tonight you are expected to be by my side, and behave according to your station." I'm already jumping up at his words. Family?

"W-what do you mean, my family?" I wince, and I'm not sure it's from the rigorousness of last night or the real possibility of his words. Either way, he misses nothing. Not the wince, not the marks he's left on my body. Not the evidence of his desire from earlier.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:45 am

I feel like a deer caught in headlights as he stalks over to me. His eyes warm on the passion marks spread across my neck, breasts, and thighs. His nose flares, scenting me.

“If I had time, I’d make you even messier. I like you covered in my come, jameela.” Roughly musing as his hand dips between my legs. His gaze rakes over my face. I hate and love his touch. It’s something about the obsessiveness in his need to possess me, then transcends everything I know I should want.

Finger dripping with our spent emissions, he sucks one digit clean before pressing the other into my mouth. He makes me like the nasty things he does. I savor our mingled flavors.

“Stop, Hassan.” I try to pull away, but he holds me fast. “What are you talking about?”

“Ah, that your family is here?” He puzzles out, looking at me before seeming to remember. “I forgot to brief you yesterday while we were otherwise occupied. Your family came in yesterday and will be dining with us tonight. The wedding will be in haste, but we shall still observe all the formalities, which includes our families having a formal dinner.”

He may as well smack me. I dropped back down to the bed, stunned.

“Shit has just gotten real, huh?” His clipped words seem to almost relish the torment I’m feeling. “Yeah, my secretary informed me your parents were floored to find out you had a baby. You didn’t tell them either.” Judgement wedges into every syllable

of his words.

I feel sick. I want to disappear. Sink into the bed and never rise again. But Ayaan, my sweet baby, needs me. People are still counting on me to salvage something of my life and career, so they can live theirs. I just need to moment to square my reality with the sucker-punch I just took square in my solar plexus.

I'm pulling the cover over my head, trying to escape reality when it's snatched back with brutally quick efficiency. "Why didn't you tell your family?"

I don't bother looking at him. I manage to squeeze out. "Not everyone's family is as close as yours." What would have been the point? More judgement, hypocrisy and recriminations? No, thank you.

Silence drops between us like a cannon ball — hot and loaded.

"You gave me a pass, so can you leave me be for a while?" I'm proud that my voice doesn't sound choked. I'm even prouder that I don't scream, cry and roll over the floor like a lunatic gnashing and wailing.

His highhandedness needs to stop. However, at the moment, I don't have the words or energy to process any of what's coming. I'm still on yesterday. My utter failure and preserving what little resolve I possess in dealing with this man. One touch from him and I melt. Yet, he looms over me now with disdain. Dare I to check, probably disgust at me being a terrible daughter by not saying anything to my family about Ayaan.

He drops the cover. "I'll be here to escort you. Be ready."

Pulling the covers over my head, I ignore him. He doesn't deserve my story. He made up his mind about me long ago.

Now, I get to make an informed decision about him. He's a judgmental asshole, who makes snap decisions about folks when he doesn't know anything about them.

Heat burns my eyes. Soon, the need to retch has me up and emptying the meager contents of my tummy into the toilet.

Trembling, I rinse the ick away as well as the remnants of the man who's changed my life in the most glorious way in one moment and is now single-handedly ruining it now.

"You look beautiful." Hassan's cool gaze eats me up as he slowly walks around me, looking at the blue dress that matches his tie, pocket square and lapel pin of lapis lazuli. The modest creation is an intricate pattern of lace opening into a V that stops just at my décolletage, flowing into a sheer skirt that overlays another bejeweled skirt that stops at my ankles. Jeweled encrusted ballerina flats wait by the entrance of the suite will cover my feet for the evening.

"Thank you," I murmur, not quite meeting his piercing gaze. He looks amazing, having changed into another exquisitely bespoke suit. The anxiety of the day almost took me under. I was so overwhelmed by the thought of seeing my family. From what Aliah says, all three of my sisters, Kadence, Song and Harmony, are here. I'm surprised my mother allowed them to come. I don't know what persuasion the Al Rasheeds used to convince her to attend the dinner of her daughter, the liar. I'm sure me being rewarded for my sinful ways is the last thing she wants to have my sisters' witness. Then there is Rob, the dick — my stepfather. Them being here obviously is his doing. Money and the chance to benefit some way off my fame has always been an incentive for his trifling ass.

Anytime there have been leaks about my life to the press about some diva behaving badly BS, I know exactly who is responsible. His presence in my life has been nothing good, save for the fact he's my sisters' father.

Thankfully, I had the entire day, thanks to Hassan's consideration, allowing me to rest in the wake of his lovemaking, to face them all tonight. The guilt at having to leave them behind as I pursued my career. The only thing that saved me was the knowledge they didn't have to endure my mom's disdain, doubts and recriminations.

"Everyone is waiting on us in the receiving room. Here." Taking my hand, he slips a blue diamond on my ring finger.

"It's beautiful." Eyeing the at least twenty carat pear-shaped cushion gem set on a titanium band, I wiggle my finger watching how it catches the light.

"It's pales compared to you, Jameela." Knowing he's just saying the smooth words as a polite response does nothing to prevent my heart from slamming against my rib cage at twice its previous rate.

"I bet you say that to all the girls you give ten-million dollar diamonds." Smirking at him, I let myself take in the magnificence of his form. Clean shaven and smelling like heaven, he's every temptation made real.

His strong, chiseled jaw kicks up. "Yeah, all one of them. Come, our families await."

Taking his offered arm, I find a strange comfort in the muscles rippling beneath my fingers. I push down the trepidation sitting heavy in my heart, drawing on the strength I've always had since I learned sometimes stepdads are the monsters hiding under the bed.

"So how did all this come about?" Just as the second course is served, Mother frowns at me, looking around the grand expanse of the private family dining room of the Al Rasheed's residence within the place grounds. It may as well be a halfway house for all she cares about the opulence. Her being unimpressed by wealth would be

commendable if she weren't being so fucking rude to her hosts. Which is her way of showing her disapproval of what she deems are my choices — running away, living my dream in defiance of them, and now having a baby out of wedlock.

Like most royals, the Al Rasheed's use the state dining room for official functions and a much smaller, yet just as posh room for family events.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:45 am

This table easily accommodates my family of five, as well as Hassan's family, with room to spare.

Tilting my head at the inane question because she knows exactly how it came about, I meet her stare until hers falters. She has four daughters despite acting like as if we were the result of immaculate conceptions.

Sometimes I wonder what happened to the woman my father loved and the mom I remember from so long ago before Rob came into our lives. Then I remember she made her choices and I let it go. I'm more than happy with mine — all of them. Like Tupac said, "Only God can judge me," and I'll be damned if I let a hypocrite and her degenerate wastrel of a husband make me feel bad.

"I guess how most things come about." I give her a sweet smile. One I've cultivated since I was nine years old. Nothing sassy that will get the taste slapped out your mouth but also giving them no ammunition.

"We are all happy about our little miracle, Ayaan. We look forward to having Lyric as a member of the family officially as well." Smiling warmly in my direction, the queen turns her gaze to my family. "And you all as well."

Seeing my sisters blossom under the shine of the queen's regard is worth any discomfort having their father here. I can see him salivating at the prospect of how he can use his association with the royal family to his benefit.

"Yes, well, be that as it may we feel we must apologize for all the upset our daughter has caused your family." Rob smoothly says, his voice filled with the gravitas of the

chairman of the deacon board that so many in our church community find impressive. “We are proud of her. However, her wild ways are well known. Ensnaring your beloved son — well, let us just say, we are glad that it’s all working out as the Lord has planned—or rather Allah.” He’s a smooth one, I’ll give him that. I almost choke on him referring to me as his daughter, when he’s been so adamant up till this point that we are not blood related.

The smarminess isn’t lost on me, though. I can tell the Al Rasheeds don’t quite know how to parse in insults mixed with praise wrapped in a deep southern drawl. They probably don’t think he knows any better. Probably thinking he’s some country bumpkin, not realizing he’s disparaging his own child with his religiosity. I’ve seen this Fog Horn Long Horn act a million times from him. He knows exactly what he’s doing when he feigns wide eyed innocence as he lets some embarrassing detail from my past slip. Like the time he told the press I didn’t graduate high school. Never saying I later got my diploma through a correspondence course, I had to pay for myself because I had no help from them. Never mentioned why I had to quit school in the first place. No, it was me seeking fame and fortune, a greedy, grasping girl who cares for no one but herself. At least, that’s what he wanted the people at our church to believe.

Ignoring the statement, I spoon the delicious hirara soup, purposely not looking at Hassan, who is sitting across from me. I can feel his eyes boring into me, demanding, beseeching, I say something in my defense.

“Ayaan is a blessing, just as his name implies, and his mother is the bestower of that gift,” Hassan bites out. The air in the room pulsates with violent energy. From my periphery, I see the king stiffen. The queen sits higher, her demeanor morphing from welcoming hostess to haughty royal as she stares down at the despicable man.

Where is the diva? Where is the baddie who acts first and claps back second? Who is this woman who doesn’t rise to the bait? Who seems to impervious to the disdain of

those who are supposed to love and champion her most.

I would tell him she has to care. I don't. Their opinion matters little to me. After twenty years of betrayal.

My sisters are all I care about. Correction Ayaan, my sisters, Fi and despite my best effort to make it so, him. And on that thought, my gaze lifts to his, seeking his comfort. Immediately I curse myself knowing I gave myself away to the viper in our midst.

"Harrumph," Rob clears his throat. He spears me with a sinister smile. My tummy drops, already knowing what's coming. "At least she didn't kill this one."

He drops the bomb, then digs into his food with relish. Mother eyes me with stony animus rippling through every fiber of her being. My sisters are all flushed with embarrassment and shame.

"Papa, how could you?" Kadence hisses in his direction, as her eyes stray back to me, pleading.

Song, sweet gifted Song cheeks flush and tears well in her eyes and Harmony reaches over to grasp her twin's hand over the knife she's clutching fiercely.

"Excuse me, Your Majesties, Your Highness," I manage to get out before I'm sick all over the table or take my knife and stab that bitch in front of everyone. The only thing stopping me is Ayaan.

Rising, I walk swiftly from the room, not caring if I'm breaking the protocol which I know I am. You don't leave until the monarch's leave, but I need to get out of that dining room before I scream and throw the biggest hissy fit of all time.

Aliah follows closely behind me in silence as I navigate my way back to my suites.

The lights are dim when I enter. I go straight into the adjacent rooms to check on my baby. I wanted him nowhere near my parents. I gave Hassan the excuse that he was tired and the dinner was way past his bedtime. All true. I told him I'd arranged for Ayaan to meet my family tomorrow, but that was a lie. It's only my sisters I'm going to allow to see him. I know mother won't see him unless Rob is there, and that's a no for me. I have not been in the same room with that monster since I left home and promised myself I never would again.

My refusal to allow him anywhere near me has cost me a relationship with my sisters because, as mother says, they were all a package deal. If he couldn't come, they couldn't come to visit. She was more than willing to accept the money I sent along with retiring her from her job as a school cafeteria worker. Yet, allowing my sisters to come to visit me — the fallen one on their own was a bridge too far.

"I love you sweet heart," I whisper, nearly choking on the words. Humiliation and anger swelling up inside me like a tsunami. Turning, I cover my mouth, trying to stifle the sob threatening to break through.

I nearly topple over when I see Hassan's mountainous form filling the door frame. His face is a mask of darkness. As if a thunder storm decided to take up residence on his face.

I'm stepping back from the fury I see there. His big arms sweep out. "Come here, Lyric."

Next, I'm flying into his outstretched arms, burrowing my face into his muscular neck.

Guttural sobs rip from me like I'm being gutted by a ravenous predator.

His hand spears into my hair, tugging my head back, making me face him. His face is hard, his eyes like flint. I watch his jaw work. “Don’t you ever let a motherfucker degrade you like that again.” He shakes me. “Do you fucking hear me?”

“Y-yes,” I hiccup, and nod, my face crumbling all the while.

“Never, again.” Tugging me close into the deep comfort of his arms, he lets me cry.

Chapter Ten

NIKAH

LYRIC

“You look absolutely beautiful,” Flower whispers behind me.

“Hell yeah she does.” Coming to stand beside me, Fi looks at me with love shining in her eyes. Love that is clouded by worry, frustration, and anger.

We’re so close I know her feelings are only reflecting mine. Worry about what the future holds and anger at how I’ve allowed this motherfucker to snatch my life from me like it was nothing. Frustration and feeling powerless to stop it. Like I haven’t worked my ass off for over a decade to get the top of the game.

Now, poof, just like it was all a fever dream. My life is gone. In the three weeks since the wedding announcement, my life has been a flurry of activity. I haven’t had a chance to fully digest my new circumstances. This whole situation gives The Shock Doctrine a run for its money.

Now, we are here on the day of the wedding and I’m still processing. Between the daily tutors, lawyers, and designers, along with meeting with US emissaries watched over closely by Hassan’s staff. I’ve had no time for myself other than what I’ve carved out for Ayaan. And silent sentinels oversee even that, as if I would do harm to my child.

More likely, they stand guard to make sure I don't run away. As if that's an option. In the short time I've been here, I've witnessed the depth and breath of my soon to be husband's power just from the obsequiousness of the American envoys. They all but blame me for the current situation as if I landed in this airspace on my own.

I've talked to none of my friends or my sisters in the weeks preceding this extravaganza. I don't even allow myself to think of Hassan. Following that disastrous dinner with my family when he held me all night, I awoke alone and haven't seen him since.

Despite having long ago come to terms with my abortion and being proud of myself for choosing me, some needy part of me wanted to talk to him about it. No dice. He's been gone and not available to me at all. I know it's deliberate. There have been days when I came to see Ayaan and knew without inquiring that he'd just left by the smell of tobacco flower, vetiver and parchment still lingering in the air. If he wanted to see me, he could have. He just chose not to.

I told myself not to be bothered by it. He showed me kindness that night and that was all I could hope for. I admonished myself for even allowing myself to think it meant he saw me as a person rather than a slag.

Now, I realize the story — no matter how much he knows about it, only confirms what he thought. I never gave a fuck what anyone ever thought of me. I just never thought the person — my person who I'd joined my life with would feel this way. Now faced with the possibility of being with him, the rest of my life is literally making me sick to my stomach.

“Come sit so we can fit you with the tiara and the veil.” Lovie-Belle coos, bubbling with excitement, patting the plush seat situated center of the sitting area of the dressing room that's filled with refreshments. It could be a spa day for all the pampering the palace staff has done for me and my bridal party.

Turning to look at the faces of my sisters I can't hide my smile. "Fairytale princess ain't got nothing on you big sis," Kadence beams over to me.

"It takes one to know one." I wink at her taking my seat allowing the billowing layers of silk taffeta to trap around me like a billowing cloud.

Taking in everyone who showed up for me, Kadence, Song and Harmony all look like angels swathed in lilac halos with my favorite color edging the beautiful modest creations that Summer along with a team of seamstresses Hassan employed worked day and night to have ready in time for today.

The wedding celebrations last seven days as tradition here, but today is the day of the official marriage. Technically, we are already married. That happened when all the contracts were signed during the Nikah-Nama, and Hassan made my mother and step-father wealthier beyond all their wildest dreams, giving them a bride price of fifty million.

The figure is obscene, but Aliah quickly let me know that Khadijah's was three times that amount and anything less would have tarnished Ayaan. Further researching the customs let me know the higher the bride price, the more elite and valued the bride. I guess I could have demanded more, but thinking that going to Rob was anathema to me. I only hope that in some way my sisters see some of that money, though I doubt it. He' probably lose it in some scheme in less than a year and probably come out owing some gangster more money.

"You all look beautiful." Come mother's quiet tone. I smile her way for company's sake. I've seen this side of her before. It's always when he's not around that she softens to the person who loves me best. I don't know if it's for the sake of keeping the peace or the fear of being impoverished like we were before he came along that makes her change when he's around. She's a person who wraps herself in religion but not the love of God. I've long since stopped trying to figure it out. I hope

one day she can heal and find peace.

“Thank you, mommy.” I say, using the word I only use when we are alone. She blossoms under my gaze and the soft gazes of my sisters.

“Okay, well, let’s get this thing on. This tiara is old with real jewels. You’ll probably need to take some ibuprofen to stave off a migraine,” Fi mutters, adjusting the crown on the upswept curls she’s piled on my head to cushion the priceless piece. The added pieces of hair she put in place make the weight barely noticeable, but I know as the day wears on, she’s probably right. When the queen brought it to me to borrow for the ceremony, she beamed, taking it out of its secured box. “The last queen of African American descent wore this crown on her wedding. Her name was Antonia.”

“Okay, stand up, so we can get the whole look.” Whispering down to me, she steps back to give me room.

Standing, I give a little turn, tilting my head this way and that to make sure it’s secure.

“Mommy,” the voice of my son reaches me before he bounds around the corner of the room, rushing straight for me.

Bending, I reach for him just as he plows into my legs. Sweeping him up, I kiss his rosy cheeks.

“Hey, my big man.” Beaming at him, I look on to the attendants following him. He’s gotten used to being surrounded by others. Them being women who cater to his every need is one reason, and then he knows his father and I are never too far away.

Walking out of the room, I see them place the elaborately decorated amira — a covered throne like chair on the ground. Four male attendants stand silently by as I get

in with Ayaan snuggling in beside me.

A retinue of guards follow us and women from Hassan's extended family singing traditional wedding songs, leading us all the way to the grand hall where the celebration seems to be already underway.

Hassan insisted on a traditional Moroccan wedding and that it be aired live on television so the world could see him claim me and his son in the most public way possible.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:45 am

As we enter the cymbals and drums lower to a steady rhythmic beat as flower petals are thrown over me, my son and entourage.

For one panicked moment, I think of just grabbing my baby and running out of here, but reason comes just as quickly. Where would I go? There is nowhere I can hide from this man. He's already shown me there's nothing he won't do to have his son in his life and I know he'll end me, just like he promised if I dare anything to subvert his will.

There is a seat large enough to sit two on a dais. Once they lower me to the ground, my sisters help me from the conveyance. I walk over to the settee taking the short flight up the stairs.

Sitting down, I pull Ayaan up beside me. Soon, the room is filled with songs of celebration and love.

Looking out, I see my friends mixed in with the women of Hassan's family. His sister, Amani, is there with an unreadable expression on her face. I know she must hate me after the hurt I caused her best friend. This should be her literal day. Because so many dignitaries had already confirmed we kept the original date. I had them send all the bridal gifts that came to Khadijah, though. It seemed only right since I took her fiancé. I didn't want her gifts.

A steady beat of even louder drums and chants reverberate around the room seeming to come from all sides like we are under conquest. Men pour in from all sides spilling through the entrances. From the one we took Sadiq leads a group in a divan lifted in the shoulders of several men. His face is flooded with fierce pride as the king strides

alongside him. They come to the dais and lower Hassan to the ground before me.

He stands before me as the crowd quiets.

The queen and king come to stand off to one side with Mother and Rob on the other. I do my best to try not to look at him.

Hassan looks at Ayaan and me, his gaze holding such fierceness I'm almost taken aback by it. I know then there will never be an escape from this mad prince. He fully intends to keep us and breed me as often as possible. The look he's wearing further confirms this. He does nothing to hide his intention as he stalks up the stairs leading to the little sofa I'm sitting on with our son.

His shadow looms over me as he stand before me. I barely notice the Imam coming to stand beside him nor the words he speaks over us.

"Lyric," his voice thunders for all to hear saying the words that seal us together.

Bending low, he presses a firm kiss to my brow. As he rises, he draws me up to stand beside him. His eyes bore into me, waiting for me to say the words.

"I," swallow the words seem trapped in my throat. His jaw tenses and flexes. Eyes turning into hard chips of jade, he almost dares me to embarrass him in front of his people. "I" the words flow from me like water from the many fountains within the palace gardens, claiming my wish and desire to be his wife three times as I have been instructed.

He remains unmoved as he watches me mouth the words.

Cheers erupt the moment I finish giving way to chants. We take our seats on the small settee with Hassan lounging like he's watching a football match with his arm

thrown behind us with Ayaan's squirming little body between us.

"Come here little man," he murmurs to our son sitting him in his lap.

Now the gap in space is taken over by his thick thighs. I feel every inch of muscle and sinew when his thigh presses against mine.

The wedding festivities continue as the Imam speaks blessings over us and our family. I notice he says announces the proclamation of Ayaan being a prince and the heir. There is nothing about me.

I know from the hours upon hours of study with the tutors assigned to me that I've not been acknowledged in any other way than being his wife and consort. Not a princess. I'm only named as alqarin not sahibat alsumui almalakii. I may as well be his baby momma and nothing else. Though the contracts give me vast holdings and wealth, the prince and his upbringing is strictly under the purview of the king and queen. Without an official title, I have no more rights than I started out with.

He played me. Made me think there would be equity in this marriage. No. I played myself. Fooled myself into thinking he would do right by me. I should have known better. He never once said he was ready to move past me not telling him about Ayaan. This is his retribution.

I watch his trifling ass look at me with cool eyes as the realization dawns on me. Just how limited my power is. The hurt is deep. I have been the captain of my life for the last decade, only to have it ripped from me in one fell swoop by this diabolical motherfucker. I should have been a little less eager to make amends. Perhaps I shouldn't have wanted to bring some sense of normalcy to Ayaan's life so soon when he kidnapped us from the plane. I should have let Prosper help when she sounded the alarm I was taken against my will. No. Instead, I put my trust in Hassan and look where that got me. Sitting here with a man who literally holds my life in his hands. At

his smallest whim, I could be executed. Hassan is all powerful here. I am nothing but his unwanted consort.

Stewing on the recent developments, I watch as food is brought in. Trenches laden with fragrant, steaming lamb, dishes of rice, spiced fruit and herbs, roasted potatoes, lentils and dishes of yogurt are set before us.

I take the small bites he offers me and offer him the same. It's all for appearance's sake. It takes everything in me not to smush the food into his smug ass face.

"Yummy, mummy," Ayaan mumbles sleepily, tucking himself into my side just as we are being serenaded by a beautiful singer accompanied by a guitarist.

The melody envelopes me as she alternates between Arabic and English. It feels like a giant sitting on my chest — like part of the dream is lost.

Powerlessness is not a vibe when you've worked so hard for everything like I have. All I've accomplished was hard won and now this prince has striped it from me like it's a game.

"He's asleep." He leans over to not disturb Ayaan. "We should go before his sleep is broken."

I cut a look his way then cast my eyes downward before any onlookers can see the animosity brimming there.

Standing with ease, he takes Ayaan in his arms and reaches to help me stand.

I take his hand, biting back the anger that I'm feeling, knowing soon I will be able to fully express my anger in our private suites — another reason I thought he wanted a new start. I'd been informed that His Highness was taking the unprecedented actions

of having his family share his suites. No separation like those of most monarchs where visits and even procreation are scheduled. No, we will share the same space like normal families.

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I follow behind him as he carries Ayaan to our new rooms, with a retinue of courtiers following behind.

“He barely moved when I laid him down. Did you want to see him?” He asks like he didn’t just sucker punch me at the wedding he forced me into.

“I kissed him before you took him back.” I keep my response quiet. Keeping my interlaced fingers held tight so I don’t end up attacking him. I scoot back deeper in to the plush cushion of the sofa, craning my head to meet his jade gaze.

“Just a consort, huh? Why’d you even marry me if I’m only going to be given side-chick status?” Inside, I cringe at the last part ending on a hitch. I sound hurt to my own ears and I hate that for me. I need to keep it together.

“Yes, a consort. Honored above all others for the one, who gave me my son and heir. Also, the woman who hid him from me for more than a year.” He looks down so coolly with the light from the room hitting the bright jade of his gaze, making him look entrancing and cruel. I immediately regret sitting. Not that my height is a match for his, but I wouldn’t feel so vulnerable.

“Did you really expect to be rewarded for your deceit?” He scoffs, wheeling away from me before rounding back on me. “I’ve killed for insults less than this. Yet not only do you live, but you have a chance to redeem yourself.”

Now, I do stand. Storming over to him, I shove his massive chest.

“How fucking dare you? Redeem myself?”

His hand whips out, snatching me by the neck. My breath seizes as he traps it in my throat.

“Jameela, don’t forget who the fuck you married.” Slowly he raises his arm, bringing me up to my tiptoes. “Redeem yourself, yes.” A wicked smile licks across his face. “Just as you did so beautifully for me a few weeks ago. You will pleasure me. I’ll breed that pretty little pussy and you will give me more children. Then, if you are a good little consort, I will elevate you.”

Dragging me closer, his lips brush mine. “Don’t think I don’t know how you’ve tried to smuggle notes out to Prosper Shipmoore begging her to be on the standby. You’ve going to cause a lot of death if you keep trying to leave with my son.” His chiding whisper belies the anger banked in his gaze, shaking his head as he reads the horror in my eyes.

“You gave me my son and for that, I allow you to live. You have to decide if you want the demise of others on your conscious. I promise you, I won’t miss any sleep because of my efforts to keep my family safe.”

Releasing me he allows me to catch my breath before continuing, “Now it’s time for us to retire wife.”

“I know you don’t expect?—”

“I do and you shall,” he snaps, nodding towards our private suite.

My heart trips over itself as I scramble to piece together his accusations. I’ve not talked to Prosper. Whatever notes he’s intercepted, they haven’t been from me. I know I’m being watched like a hawk and one thing I’m not is a dummy. I know I can’t get away with anything so brazen. There is no one in this palace I trust to help me escape.

He follows close behind me until we reach the interior of the bedroom. I remember how I wanted to avoid even looking at it that first day. The last time we came together, it was in my suite now as I enter his private sanctum. I can't help but feel intimidated entering his sacred space.

The bed sits high and imposing. His staff has thoughtfully pulled back the damask duvet. Cream and muted gold sheets seem welcoming and cozy. There is a black box on the night stand on what I assume is his side of the bed and a crystal carafe with crystal water glasses on the side which supposedly is mine.

"Come." Looking up, I watch as he disappears into a darkened corridor. Is this some type of red room bullshit? I wonder traversing the shadowed hallway. I follow him a short distance that opens into a softly lit space.

There is a pool size bath, set in marble.

"The water is continuous to deter the jinn." He casts a look over his shoulder as he strips before me.

After tossing his wedding attire onto a nearby divan, he turns to me all rippling muscle and swinging dick.

"Turn," he murmurs.

Silently, heart thudding like the first time with him, I do as he bids. An interminable amount of time passes as he unbuttons the pearl clasps that line the back of the gown. The moment the built in corset eases, I exhale. He makes quick work down the last, stopping just at the rise of my bottom.

Grabbing the material at my shoulders, he tugs the dress down. The silk brushes my nipples making me gasp. With a swoosh, it falls to the floor at my feet.

“Here, hold my shoulder,” he murmurs, helping me to step out of the pile of silk taffeta. Gathering the dress, he tosses it over his clothes like it didn’t cost thousands and many hours to make.

“Turn.” In stockings and nothing else, I face him. His dick is already full and brimming, with come seeping from the tip.

“I-I um..., where’s the restroom?” Frantically, I look around. My eyes snag on the door on the far side of the room.

“There,” he nods in the direction I’m looking. “I’ll await you in the bath.” He turns, as if dismissing me.

Hating that I have to transverse this football field of a bathroom with him watching every step, I feel despondency creep up a little-bit for the way this day I turning out.

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I hurry over to the water closet, feeling the pressure in my abdomen and not wanting to give him anymore of a show. I take a hurried peek over my shoulder.

I needn't have worried because he's easing down into the water, relaxing back, resting his head against the brim, with his eyes closed.

After taking my sweet time using his smart toilet and washing my hands, I join him.

Feeling his eyes on me, I make my way back over to him. Never one to let anyone's reactions to make me self-consciousness about my curves bother me, I have to admit as I notice his gaze tracking over every inch of my body, I feel apprehensive. Not about his judgement but the sheer predator lurking in his gaze.

Last time was so sudden and filled with emotion, he probably didn't notice all the changes. I mean Ayaan was a very aggressive nurser, and he ravaged my breasts. Fi encouraged me to get a lift or a boob job, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it knowing if anything happened, I'd leave him alone. Plus, I earned these titties. Still the way he watches me?—

Reaching up, I cover them as I approach the bath's steps directly opposite him, hoping that I can submerge myself to keep him from noticing the obvious droop.

“Stop.” My eyes snap up to his unwavering gaze. His brow quirks. “Unless you are about to play with those pretties to get them ready for me to suck, wife.”

Why do his words and the way he calls me, wife makes my pussy flex and flood, I'd never know. As much as I don't like his ass, my body, especially my traitorous kitty

kat seems to love him.

“Come jameela.” His voice is so rough and commanding as I wade over to him. The closer I get, I see the way his hand moves under the water. He’s jacking his dick in slow, long strokes. The head glistening above the water like a beacon showing me the way.

“Take me in hand, little sparrow,” He growls, easing back, and spreading his legs, making room for me.

Settling between his legs, I do as he wishes. Hands closing around the smooth hard flesh, I mimic the movements he made moments ago. Watching my work, I suck my bottom lip into my mouth. Up and down I stroke him as he fucks both my hands wrapped around his big dick, barely meeting and in no way able to cover him from root to tip. However, I’m not a flake, so what I lack in covering him I make up by adding a little twist and slide of my hand.

“Fuck, you’re such a good little wife,” he groans, thrusting his hips in tandem with my movements.

“Let me come in your mouth.” Demand or plea, I don’t know, but I cover him, taking the head of his dick into my mouth. Resting my hand on his thighs, I switch angles so I can take in down my throat. He immediately starts fucking my mouth. Heavy hands cup my head and long fingers spear into my hair, tugging me down. “That’s it. Take your husband’s dick down your pretty little throat. Show me how much you want to please your prince.” His voice seems to rumble so deep I feel it down to the center of my soul. He tastes clean and all man. He fucks my throat in steady, long drags, making me gag at the end.

I feel his thighs flex and stiffen. “Take my seed, sparrow, take it now.” He presses me close as I swallow rope after rope of his sweet, salty essence.

With a swiftness that leaves me dizzy, he turns me, lifting me over the edge of the bath.

“Look how fat and needy this motherfucker is.” Eyes locked on me, he dips his fingers between my pussy lips, lightly stroking me. Bringing two wet digits to his lips, he sucks them clean, his jade gaze never leaving me.

“Delicious. I took everything to stay away after I had you again.” Reading my expression his mouth flattens. “No, it wasn’t my choice. Umm was informed of our time together. She insisted I do nothing more to make your time here more challenging.”

Pushing my legs further apart, he slides deeper into the water so that his face is level with the neediest part of me. “Now there is nothing that will stop me from giving you what you need, Lyric.” Pressing a filthy kiss on my clit, he begins to ruin me with every lick and lave of his tongue.

“Hold that pussy open for me, beautiful.” He tells me, placing my feet on the edge.

Whimpering, I hold my spread knees apart, ignoring the slight ache in my joints that is soon forgotten once he buries his head deep in my pussy. Sucking my clit with gentle pulls, he almost sends me over the edge but stops just shy of letting me climax. Then his tongue is inside of me trying to find its home. Muscles clench trying to capture and hold him there for as long as possible before he slips free, only to circle and tease me, continuing his exorbitant torture of my pussy.

“Ohmygoodness, Hassan.” I gasp, delving my fingers into the slick curls of his hair. Pulling back his lips wet with me, he spears me with a ruthless look. “Husband,” snatching me to him, he takes my mouth, making me taste myself on his lips. His tongue slides deep mastering me, fucking me, making me moan. “Say it, wife.” There’s a dare there.

I swallow. He only made you a consort. Whispers in my mind. I shake my head no.

A strong hand manacles my neck. "Say it, wife." Eyes glinting with wickedness accompanying the snarl on his lips. Again, I shake my head, no.

"You leave me no choice but to punish you, wife." He tells me, squeezing a little for emphasis. A cruel smile spreads thinly across his face. "You will say, rahma if it becomes too much for you, jameela. It means mercy."

He squeezes. "What do you say?"

"Rahma" I gasp.

He smacks my pussy. A scream spills from my lips yet I don't say, rahma — not then and not when he does it again and again. Not when he moves behind me with his dick pressed heavily between my bottom cheeks and spans me with a hard rhythm that has me writhing and squirming in his lap.

"Such a naughty little wife." Slap. "A disobedient," Slap. "Obstinate." Slap. "Mean." Slap. I gasp at being called, mean. "Oh you don't like that?" I can feel him smile as he press his chiseled jaw against my cheek, his chuckle is sinister and keeps spanking me bringing me so close as he keeps on with his ruinous administration to my sore, aching pussy.

"Look at how puffy and needy my girl is." Pushing two fingers in deep, he groans. "Still so fucking tight." Can you take me?" He starts finger fucking me in slow deep strokes. "Look at how she grips me. She's so sweet to me. Not like your mean ass," he whispers cruelly in my ear. "Get on my dick." Shifting me, he positions me so I'm facing him.

"Take your husband inside of you, wife," he grits, his eyes hard and heated with

untold desire.

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With trembling fingers, I take his phallus, pressing down until his head breaches me. The slight burn as he stretches me has me biting my lip in pleasure.

“That’s it. Be a good little cumslut for your husband and take me to the hilt.” He urges, pressing up into my slick heat. Even with the water and my own lubrication, it takes effort to do as he commands.

Midway, I have to take a breath. Muscles clinch around him, trying to resist and welcome at the same time. If I hadn’t had sex with him before, I would doubt I could take him, but like I said, I’m not a quitter.

Long fingers brushing my clit help to ease my way. Soon I’m taking all of him. I swear he’s in my chest. My breath comes like a hummingbird’s beating wings. His edging has me on the precipice of pain and pleasure.

Effortlessly, he grips my curves in a bruising hold, lifting me and dropping me on his dick. The motion makes waves splash against us. Gripping his shoulders at first to just hold on, soon, I find myself working in concert with him. Circling his waist with my legs, I bounce up and down on his length watching and loving the way his jaw flexes every time I slam home.

Higher and harder he lifts and fucks deep, taking me closer to the height of bliss.

“Ohh,” I cry when he keeps hitting my spot.

He stops. “Say it.” Holding me suspended, I know he’s not going to let me finish if I don’t comply.

“Husband.” The words are just as broken as I am after his punishing pleasure. I plead, “Husband, please let me come — let me pleasure you.”

Jerking me into his powerful arms. He smothers me with kisses as he surges into me hitting my spot. Working his dick into me with determined precision, he drags his head against the most sensitive place inside me as he uses his fingers to compound my pleasure by massaging my clit.

“So fucking good, songbird. You’re so good to me, lil’mama.”

His words, his movements, both send me over the edge into a bliss that surpasses all our other experiences. The meanness gives way to tenderness as he finds his own release.

Kissing me, kissing me, praising me, his hands stroking every part of me. “Beautiful, glorious wife.”

Pulling back, he looks down at me. “You’re mine now. I will protect you and our children always.” He promises with a solemnity that makes me wish he loved me a little.

Chapter Eleven

HARD TRUTHS

HASSAN

The hard knock I’ve heard for more years than I can count sounds on my door, making me look up just as my brother strides inside my office. He does a brief perusal with barely any interest of the room that would have been his had he not abdicated for Lovie-Belle Howard the director of the two of our films Just Us and a

romcom action movie starring a new promising new actress BiBi and the box office powerhouse, Kris “The Kronic” Kirakos who somehow managed to get the third and youngest Howard sister, Miracle to marry him shortly after.

“I don’t have you on my schedule,” I say drily, watching him. His long form taking up one of the chairs in front of my desk.

“As if that would matter. You know you’ve missed me, little brother. Though it wouldn’t seem like it with the way you have been avoiding my calls.” Crossing one leg over the other, Sadiq looks on with a benign curiosity that belies the subject I know he’s champing at the bit to talk to me about.

More than talk — lecture as only one who knows me the best in the world can. I’m definitely not in the mood for this bullshit. I have a country to run.

“In case yesterday was not indication enough, big brother, I’ve had my hands full securing the succession and making sure my wife and son are safe.”

Lying the pen I’m holding down with care, I do my best not to give myself away. My identical twin more than anyone knows my tells and the buttons to push to get me riled.

Meeting his gaze with a steady one of my own, I wait for him to continue.

“As to that.” He quirks an eyebrow. “Lyric? I didn’t think you cared for her. At least not enough to bed her. Let alone marry her. You could have easily arranged something that would have allowed you to keep Khadijah and Lyric, her career,” he muses. I can tell just from the way he’s broaching the subject, he sees far more than he should.

“Ayaan is the rightful heir. Securing the throne comes first. I would not have him

denied his birthright, no matter who his mother is. Jhori Bin-Saladin made it more than clear he would accept nothing but his biological grandchild, so I was left with no choice. Plus, Khadijah has always been more like a sister to us than anything else. Would I have grown to love her? In time, maybe. It is more likely we would have just been good friends or worse case, she would have grown disillusioned with the match.”

“You’re saying you can grow to love Lyric? Care for her, even? I thought you couldn’t stand her. The diva like behavior?” He challenges with a shrewd spark in his eyes.

“She’s a wonderful mother to our son.” Admitting that fact, I take up the pen again, shifting it against the sheaf of documents needing my signature as a way of dismissing him.

“Hassan.” His voice is soft and chiding. “I’m not only your brother, but your best friend. Why did you take her off that plane? You ruined her career in one irrecoverable action.” I let his words fall between us. Twirling the pen between my fingers, the metal is cool, my expression colder as I regard my brother.

He stops, his eyes widening. “You’re punishing her.” Slowly he shakes his head, dismay and disapproval spreading over his face.

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“You punished Lovie-Belle.” I remind him of when he denied her the job of a lifetime, because he couldn’t stop obsessing over her.

“Yes, and I regret it. You can’t take her dreams from her. Father tried that with us and you see where that got him. He was left with nothing until Lovie-Belle convinced us all these years later to relent.” His reminder causes a chink to form in the armor around my heart. Until the reality of what she did ices it over. Just as it does every time I dare to think about it. I’m not sure I will ever forgive her treachery.

“And what would you have done if she kept your son from you?” Challenging him in return, I watch his jaw flex before he spears me with a look of resignation. “We share the same DNA. You know exactly what the fuck I’d do — the same thing you did. So is that why you made her a consort? To leave room for a true queen?”

“Fuck no,” I snap. “Lyric is the only wife I will ever have.” Heat suffuses my neck. The flush is as hot as our lovemaking last night. I was late making it to my office after having her right after my morning prayers. The way I watched her sleeping form as I dressed is a thing of legend. Like some lovelorn janissary watching a maiden he knows he should not have. I had to drag myself away.

No matter what happens between us. I would not bring another into this marriage, knowing the turmoil it would cause my son and his mother. Yet, consort she shall remain until she stops plotting with Prosper Shipmoore to leave with my son. Putting another baby in her will solve that problem. It’s only a matter of time.

“Well alright then.” He smirks with a knowing that only one who shared a womb with me could have.

“Fuck you.” I tell him, my eyes narrowing, not liking the smug ass expression on his face.

“Oh, you’re doing that all on your own.” He tells me just as another knock sounds on the door and this time, my errant secretary pops his head in the door.

“Your Highness, Mr. Carrington is here.” He informs me of the appointment I was actually getting ready for — FADE.

Sadiq stands to move to my side. It doesn’t matter if he doesn’t agree with my actions. In public, we always show a united front no matter who, no matter what. It could be no other way. He’s been my boon companion since we made our presence known. From the time I could remember, my brother has been my defender and I his. Even from our formidable mother when we would get into mischief when we were toddlers.

FADE’s tall form strides into the room dressed in his signature all white attire of low-slung jeans, Henley and jacket. The diamond and platinum necklace he famously wears to honor Delightful’s brother and his best friend, Justice, sparkles on his neck. His only other adornment is his wedding ring.

“The fuck, man,” he snarls, coming to stand before my desk. Cocking one leg over the other, I lounge back regrading the man who gave me and my brother the start that helped us build an empire when he let us produce his music videos. He took a chance on two unknown producers when no one else would.

The man who is as close to me as a brother. The best friend I’m not sure betrayed me. Lyric is also his best friend. Their history runs much deeper. One he never talks about. He is her first champion and, in many cases, her only defender when it comes to rumors of her diva like behavior.

“My exact sentiments — friend,” I growl with equal vehemence. “You want me to believe you knew nothing about my son when your life and my wife’s are so intertwined?” I scoff. “Get the fuck outta here, man. You’re lucky to make it out of my country without being sent to a black site, motherfucker.”

A low chuckle meets my words. “You’re wild as fuck, man. You know that? Think I haven’t already anticipated that shit? But Imma let you slide because I understand you’re upset over your family. The thing you need to understand about Lyric and will probably serve you well. Maybe even save your life — she’s a survivor. She knows how to handle her business and hold her secrets. Ain’t shit you gone know about her, she doesn’t want you to know. She operates on level that none of us as men have ever had to understand or deal with. When I asked her why she kept this from me, of all people, she said it was because she knew I would tell you because you’re my boy and she knows how much we hold each other down. She was scared you’d take her baby and damned if you didn’t. Then you disrespected her by making her consort when you know she’s only ever been a queen.” His anger is palpable as his hazel eyes rake over me with barely held violence. “The blogs are eating this shit up. You’ve made her a laughingstock, man. They out here calling my girl, “the queen of nothing, the royal side chick.”

The scathing words take me aback. I’d not thought outside of the fact that I didn’t want to empower her beyond her household, especially after I found out about her reaching out to that nuisance, Prosper Shipmoore.

“I’ll handle it,” I tell him.

“See that you do. She was wrong not to tell you about Ayaan. Sometimes our women have to go to extremes when dealing with motherfucker’s like us.” he stands his gaze is unwavering leaning forward to offer his fist he adds. “Your son is beautiful, man. Despite having your ugly mug. Makes sense why she didn’t show him to anyone. He’s both of y’all’s splitting image.” He nods to me and Sadiq for emphasis.

Reaching out, I dap him up. “Thanks man, I’ll set you straight on any blow back with the tour.”

“Just treat her right, motherfucker. She’s had it harder than all of us coming up.” Waving my words away, his own are solemn.

Saying nothing, I wait for him to fill me in on the rest.

“She, Justice, and me were the three musketeers from Headstart onwards. We used to say, “From the knee high to the tree high.” She could always sing, man. Singing “This little light of mine,” on the way to and from school. Said her real daddy sang it to her. Her daddy and mom were real young. Then he died in Iraq by a roadside bomb. But since they hadn’t got married yet, her mom didn’t get much because she wasn’t officially on any paperwork. When they finally got everything squared away and her moms finally started getting a little stipend, Rob was on the scene always fucking it up doing dumb get rich quick schemes or gambling it away. Whatever you gave him in bride price will probably be gone within a year and he’ll be back on your door step.”

Scrubbing his face like he wants to erase the memory he presses on. “Anyway, she was always performing at churches and little talent shows. Her parents didn’t want her singing with us because they felt rap was sinful or whatever. Then we got this chance to open for Tone Rich, the biggest promoter at the time after he saw us on YouTube. She and Justice were going to get married. We were all going to pursue our music — Ahem.” Clearing his throat, he takes a moment. Retelling Lyric’s much rawer, unfiltered part of the story than what we brought to film. “His being killed nearly destroyed all of us, but at least DiDi and I had our families. Lyric had no one. She ran away and joined me on tour a few months later and the rest is history. Herparents never forgave her. To be honest, I was surprised to see them here.” Finishing the abbreviated history, keeping as many secrets as he tells, he sits down, clasping his hands in a tight fist, facing me.

“All that diva shit is her way of making sure her fans get their hard, earned money’s worth. She loves them just as hard as they love her. She will give you that same loyalty, but you gotta come correct.” He shrugs like the ball is in my court.

Nodding, I go over to the locked cabinet taking out my hookah. A smirk spreads over my twin’s face. “You’ve had good hashish, but you haven’t had it this good.” I nod to Sadiq, “Brother, you do the honors.” I hand it over to him, opening the doors to my private garden. Following them out, I take a seat in the small private area just outside my office. From this vantage point, I can see Lyric and Ayaan playing outside of our private suite. They are far enough not to hear us and the way my terrace is elevated makes it so I can watch them unobserved like I do every day when they are outside and I have to work.

After we all toke from the pipe, I settle back, allowing the aroma and my friend’s words wash over me.

Perhaps I misjudged her. Still, keeping Ayaan’s existence from me is a bitter pill to swallow, yet I know there is no way of moving forward if I don’t. She has some proving to do in the trust department as well. Like the constant messages of her attempting to flee that my attendants intercept.

“That’s what’s up,” FADE says taking pull from the prepared pipe.

“Man,” he says, impressed, looking from me to my brother.

“Told you,” I say letting my brother have a turn first.

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Later after seeing Lyric's family and our friends including FADE and his family off on the royal air fleet, sending them back to America's shores with no black site detours, I come to the suite I now share with my family looking on my son and new wife cuddled together sleeping in our bed.

Careful not to wake either of them, I pick up Ayaan, taking him to his room.

After tucking him in and making sure he doesn't wake back up, I head straight to my bath, washing the day away.

Nothing removes the sting of shame that I've caused Lyric. After smoking and kicking back with my best friends in the world, I took time to look at the blogs and Tiktoks speaking on Lyric, paying close attention to one particularly vicious entertainment influencer.

Seems like there were several clips from DiDi's cousin, Joi, who, though gossipy with exclusives she'd could have only gotten from her cousins, was not cruel or mean. Her little Shelby-Love Chronicle was one of the few places that showed us in a positive light.

Resolving to give her this one thing. I made the necessary calls to wipe those stories from the internet.

Rubbing the towel through my curls, I stand over my wife watching her sleep much the same way as I did this morning. She'd probably be shocked to know she snores.

I can't seem to stop being fascinated by the way her nose scrunches up in her sleep or

the way she clutches the cover like it's a lovey.

She's too grown to be called adorable, but that is exactly what she seems like to me at the moment.

Sighing because there is nothing for it. I take off the robe climbing into bed.

"Hassan?" She mumbles sleepily, struggling as if to make sure it's me and not anyone else. Her hypervigilance makes rage snake around my heart. That night when she hid from me under those mountains of pillows is never far from my mind. I have not pressed her. I haven't earned the right to demand she tell who hurt her but when I do and I will; I will not stop until I have wiped that motherfucker from this earth.

"It's me habibti," I murmur the endearment I never meant to use for her, but it seems so right in this moment. Pulling her into the safety of my arms, I hold her long moments, resolving in some way to make this work.

Chapter Twelve

WHEN THE WORLD CRIMBLES

LYRIC

Over a thousand reported dead and at least as many missing as authorities scramble to save as many people as possible from the rubble. The earthquake striking south of Marrakesh was at least 6.8 if not higher. The Red Crescent has been deployed, and recovering teams from neighboring countries are on the way. His Majesty King has tapped His Royal Highness, Prince Hassan Al Rasheed, to lead the rescue and recovery efforts.

My tummy drops, watching as person after person pulled from under collapsed

buildings in the towns of Al Haouz and Taroudant. No one was spared. Historic landmarks all the way to Marrakesh were leveled by the earthquake.

I cover my throat, watching a little child's limp body being pulled free, trying hard not to break down.

Despite the being found deep underground, his little fingers wiggle.

"Praise God," the words pass brokenly from my lips. Covering my heart, I continue to watch, unable to drag myself away.

"You need to turn that off before Ayaan comes running in here and sees you upset. You've been glued to the tv all day." Fi tells me, coming over to grab the remote.

"No," I snatch it back. "I need to see what's going on." I tell her, turning down the volume in compromise. She's right. I've been locked into the broadcast from the moment Hassan was called away fore day this morning.

"Why?" she screws me with a withering look. "These motherfuckers gave you one briefing, if you can even call it that. They have been locked away politicking and shit all day and have not once come to check on you after the news dropped. Being a consort is not a queen. It's not anything other than waiting for him to come back and dick you down."

Her words feel like slap after vicious slap of truth. The kind that only a true friend or sister will tell you. There is nothing I can say because she's said everything I have been thinking in the weeks since Hassan forced me to marry him.

Gone is the powerhouse singer. The superstar has disappeared not only from the public, but from my very being. I only sing, play songs and lullabies for my son now. No accolades or achievements, no adoring fans or pleasing any crowds. I'm like a

chubby little domesticated tabby, not even a fierce siamese like my cat back home with Onyx. No, I'm literally doing just as she says, waiting every day for Hassan to come back from his office or some meeting in another province to dick me down trying to get me pregnant.

"I don't know what you want me to do. In case you haven't noticed, I'm good and stuck. I have no power here. I'm locked in with a man who how controls every aspect of my life. Even being with Ayaan depends on me not making him mad, Fi." Trying to make her understand is met with skepticism. Even I hear the defeated despondency in my tone.

"Girl, if you don't get the fuck outta here with that bullshit. That man got you dickmatized. You can tell him no. You can make him honor your wishes. Yeah, he got you good with that whole kidnapping and lord of the manner thing, but let me learn you something like my granny used to say. You need to adapt and overcome because you've lost yourself." She huffs, turning away. Frustration is palpable in her every movement.

"I get it and I'm sorry I got you caught up in my mess, bestie." Her head swivels back to me. I see things too.

"How are things over at Fariq's?" I ask in a gentle tone.

Shoulders slumping, she sits down on the settee facing opposite mine. "Terrible, horrible, no good." Then she covers her face, staring down at the plush rug beneath our bare feet. "We made love." The confession erupts like out of her like Mount Kilauea.

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She looks up, her face flushed with so much emotion I'm not sure to respond.

"Okay, you made love?" I ask only because my friend calls sex many things but never this. I also know she's not been with anyone since long before her transition.

"Yes," the words come out on a hiccup and a sob.

Rushing over to her side, I hug her close. "Shh, hunnie. It's okay. Was he mean? Are you okay?" My tummy is in knots. I know how vulnerable sex makes us and I know this is a big deal for Fi.

"He was amazing," her voice strikes a high pitch on the last word.

"T-that's good. That's what we want, right?" I ask, trying to figure out why she's so upset.

She nods even as her eyes fill with more tears. "Yeah, but —" her words trail off. Then she looks back. Leaning in close, she says in hushed tones. "I've been working with Prosper to get us out of here, but now I'm scared I'm involved with him and worse. I think he may really like me back."

"Fi." A deep baritone has us both turning to the entrance. The moment Fariq's gaze lands on her, his face darkens, and he spears me with a menacing look. Then he does the unthinkable — steps into our royal suite.

Striding directly over to us like his life is not in peril with every step he takes inside of the suite of the prince and his royal consort Fariq doesn't stop until he drops to

his hunches in front of Fi.

“Why are you crying beautiful one?” His voice is rough as he rubs away a stray tear.

“We just saw a little boy — it was a boy, I think?” Her eyes search over to mine and I nod, helping with her smooth lie. “He was being pulled out of the rubble and he was alive. I just got overwhelmed, but Lyric was helping me through it.” She smiles over at me.

Turning to look at me, Fariq gives me a fleeting smile. I don’t think he will ever like me. It’s fine as long as he’s good to my friend.

“Shukran,” he murmurs to me. “Come, we must go. The prince will be here shortly, he’s had a very hard day. He will need his family.” Rising after offering the little heads up, he pulls Fi to her feet and they exit through the gardens as they often do.

Sitting back, I finally do as Fi suggested earlier and turn off the TV. I don’t want Hassan to see what he’s been immersed in all day.

I call for fresh tea and refreshments. It’s early evening, and the sun is going down. I already know he will have his Mahgrib, evening prayers before coming to the suite, so that gives me a little time to freshen up.

I hurry through my ablutions, bringing Ayaan with me to play a little after the attendant drops him off with a smile. This is rote for me now. Each evening I’m the very picture of domestication when my husband arrives. I can’t lie and say there is not a part of me that doesn’t actually love this life that has been forced on me.

Retirement was a very real dream, but if I’m being honest, that’s all it was. Maybe I was fooling myself. If I were never found out, I don’t know if I would have ever stopped going on tour. The draw of excitement and the drug of my fandom’s

adoration is something I have always struggled not to let motivate me to do more than I should.

Taking the wine to market as part of my brand would have been a huge endeavor, but I would have loved it too much to stop. There is just something about making your own money, and being the queen of your destiny, that always hits a sweet spot for me. Especially after seeing how my mom was caught up in Rob's snare of his controlling my dad's money and using his position in the church to quell any dissent from us. Always reminding us of a woman's place and the man as head of the household.

Hassan making me sit down is the only way this life would have come to pass. Though his methods are foul as fuck. I want and need my career. I want and need my family. I stop myself at the thought. When did I start thinking of him as such? Nemesis, lover even reluctant husband but family?

"Baba," Ayaan squeals running on feet surer than they were a month ago over to his looming father.

"Ibni," comes the soft chuckle as Hassan hugs him close. He has eyes only for Ayaan, yet I can see the shadows lurking in their depths. He pulls him close to his freshly shaven face and clean clothes he's changed into before his prayers. Closing his eyes he holds Ayaan, seeming to take in all the love our son is more than happy to shower on him. That is until his mini-me gets antsy and starts to squirm away.

I watch as he puts him down to let him play.

"Are you hungry?" I ask moving to call for refreshments.

"No." I pause at the sharp reply.

Pausing at the clipped severity in his voice, I turn back. “Tea?”

He shakes his head, his eyes flicking to me barely, then on a sigh he sits on one couch facing where Ayaan is busy placing blocks. Focusing completely on our son he seems intent on shutting me out.

Flummoxed, I stand feeling lost, my tummy knotting with worry and feeling more than a little silly, not sure if I should go to him or settle on the floor and play with Ayaan.

I’m terrible at this. Never had to cater to a man in my life. I’m the one people cater to. The person servants constantly inquire if I need anything. And never have I ever been as dismissive to any person as he being to me.

Head high, I go over to my son and sit on the floor crisscrossed opposite him. His smile is beatific. “Here, Mommy.” He hands me an armful of blocks before resuming his tower.

Again and again he builds the tower as high as he can until it falls. Each time I praise his ability. Yet it is his father he looks to for acknowledgment.

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“Great job, little man.” Comes the deep baritone each time as he watches him intently. I can feel his eyes on us, but I don’t dare look up, fearing what I may see.

“Story?” Ayaan asks Hassan over a heavy yawn much later, after more play and songs.

“Yes.” Ayaan is already curling up beside him as I go to get the book he likes most, *The People Who Could Fly*, my sister, Song gifted to him when she came for the wedding.

“The Beautiful Girl Of The Moon Tower,” Hassan begins, telling the Black Folktale story. Ayaan almost manages to make it to the end of the tale before he drifts off to sleep.

“I’ll take him.” I offer, moving to take my baby.

“I have him,” Hassan says, sounding cold and aloof. I guess family time did nothing to ease the trauma of the events of the day or whatever has him acting so mean to me.

I don’t take it personally. The devastation he must have witnessed would have shaken even the toughest person. I’m still not over seeing that child pulled from the rubble.

I follow, giving him the space he seems to need. Ayaan seems to be his safe place. I understand why that isn’t me, though knowing that does nothing to soften the blow. I chalk it up to the little girl in me hoping for the family she deserved but was only served betrayal in the worse way.

“Good night, my love,” I whisper, leaning over Ayaan after Hassan says his goodnight and blessing over our son.

I place a soft kiss on his brow. Gazing down at his angelic face my heart squeezes thinking again of the child I saw earlier.

Entering the living room area, I’m once again at a loss about how to approach this man who seems to be akin to a lion with a thorn in his paw, only I am the thorn.

His gaze tracks me as though I’m prey after I make the decision to join him in the seating area instead of staying in our bedroom. I’ve never been a coward and I won’t start being one now.

I sit on the couch a little down from him, wishing not for the first time this palace had alcohol but knowing my anxiety would probably have me sliding into being a stone cold drunk if liquor was available.

“I’m so sorry about everything you’ve had to endure today,” I say to the closed off expression of my husband that greets me.

He remains stonily silent just regarding me with a coolness that is so unsettling I have to make myself stop from squirming like an ant under a magnifying glass being held by a malicious child under the sun.

“Okay,” I say rising. “I just wanted you to know I was here if you needed to talk about it.”

Stepping away from the glacial coldness of his response, I’m proud of myself for not completely collapsing from his awful reaction.

“Like you give a fuck.” The viciously snarled words stop me cold.

If I had the sense God gave a cricket, I'd take my ass right on out of here. Instead, I whirl around, forgetting for a moment how utterly I'm at his mercy.

"What?" Sputtering with confused indignation, I step back over to him. "I waited all day for word. Fi and I were glued to the TV for news updates. W-we saw a little boy not much older than Ayaan being pulled from the rubble." The words come out on a sob.

Hot tears spill down my face. I cover my face. In that moment, I want nothing more than for his strong arms, to close around me, to hold me, letting know everything will be okay. I need him so much, but I realize in seconds there will be no comfort coming from him.

"Hm, your tears are touching, wife. Yet still, after seeing all that fucking tragedy of families being buried alive and children being orphaned, you still find the time to try to rip ours apart." He may as well have slapped me. The viciousness of his word cut me like shards of glass.

"What are you talking about?" Stunned at his words, I dash the wetness from my face, turning to confront this braying beast towering over me with the wrath of hell in his eyes.

"You trying to leave me and take my son. I told you what would happen if I caught you." His words are like sharp daggers of an icy blade slicing into me.

I back up, but he snatches me, drawing me tightly into his much larger form. His body pulsates with rage. His eyes are gold and jade ice cutting at every emotion he sees playing across my face.

"I don't know what you talking about, Hassan." I can tell the moment he realizes the untruth of my words — the same moment I recall something Fi said in the midst of

our conversation earlier — something I didn't respond to so caught up as I was with the turmoil I was seeing on television and the revelation about her knew situation with Fariq. She mentioned working with Prosper to get us out of here. She was conflicted because of the new relationship she was in.

Fuck my life.

Impossibly, his face hardens more a split second before a sinister smile spreads across his face. "I was going to kill that little busybody for meddling in my fucking business, but it seems she's already ran afoul of The Takeda and got snatched up for her efforts. Your little friend won't be able to help you leave me. She'll be busy with her own training with the new head of the Tatsumoto Yakuza Clan."

His hand shoots out, clasping my throat. Slowly he draws me up to my tiptoes, his hand steadily tightening as he forces me to face his tiger jade gaze.

"You will humble yourself. You will be the mother of my children. You will be the consort I require or I will break your fucking neck. The only reason I haven't at this point is because you could be with child."

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He squeezes, letting me know just how serious he is. My eyes sting. My heart starts to race. My feet kick as my hand scrabble for purchase. Pinpricks dance behind my eyes as I reach for and fail to find purchase on the sleeves of his tunic. I can hear my heart in my ears. A heavy thud pounds in my head like a sluggish drum. Tears run in heavy streams down my face.

Just as I'm about to black out, he tosses me back onto the sofa. I bounce, roll, heaving huge gasps of air. I'm about the fall on the floor when powerful hands pull me back.

Dark spots dance in front of my blurry gaze before his face comes into focus. His mouth is a grim line.

"Don't make me punish you, Lyric. I will make your life a living hell." He promises.

"You already have." I say, curling away from him, burying my face into the cushions, allowing the devastation to fully cover me as sobs wrack through me in vicious waves.

Chapter Thirteen

SHE AIN'T NOTHING BUT GOLD DIGGER?

LYRIC

Trouble at the Palace?

Reports are flooding in that there is trouble in the fragile paradise of His Royal

Highness, Prince Hassan, and High Consort, Lyric. Several palace sources make claims of a huge fight the night of the earthquake. How in the midst of this devastation did the couple find time to have a domestic squabble leaves many in dismay. Some say the High Consort was upset about the lack of attention the prince has given her after he did the honorable thing and married her, giving her child the highest of honors, naming him heir. Others claim High Consort Lyric is demanding more trinkets along with properties and even a yacht of her own, calling the one His Royal Majesty the King already owns an antique. Many are tiring of the tactics they say are of a gold digger, or is it the adulation of her millions of fans that she misses?

“Man, fuck them.” Fi hisses, throwing the folded newspaper on the ottoman beside us as we lounge in the garden.

“Don’t let it bother you.” I wave dismissively. “So, how are things with you?” I lift a brow at her, smiling when I see her blush.

“Good, but you should have let me come clean.” She chides, pouring us both a tea.

“He wasn’t in the mood to listen.” I say low, plucking a rose petal from my kaftan. I lift my hand, letting the wind pick it up and take it. Briefly I watch it dance away, a little jealous of its freedom.

“Girl, what did he do? He didn’t —” Her voice sharpens in horror.

“No, nothing like that. I’ve never seen him so mad. Not even when I first got here.” I shake my head, remembering that night a week ago, like it happened just moments before. “Anyway, I haven’t seen him since that night. He’s only in long enough to give Ayaan a kiss, then leaves. Always when I am otherwise occupied.”

“He’s a demented motherfucker,” she hisses. Her vehemence making her beautiful face even more expressive. “We have to get you and Ayaan out of here.”

“I notice you’re leaving yourself out of the equation, friend.” I smirk at her. “Listen, when I’m ready to leave, I’ll let you know. Don’t you do anything else on my behalf. You’ve helped enough.” I dead-eye her, pressing my lips in a hard line to let her know I mean business. “Prosper’s out of commission, anyway.” Lowering my voice so the nosey-Nellys lurking around who are making it their business to make me look like a fucking clown ass gold digger don’t overhear what I have to say. I inform Fi about everything Hassan told me about Prosper’s plight.

“That’s so messed up.” She shakes her head in stunned disbelief. More than a little afraid for our friend.

“I know, so imagine what Hassan will do if I leave or even try to again. He’s all powerful here.” I don’t add that leaving was the last thing on my mind. Now, I’m not so sure, but I know a fruitless cause when I see it. I’m only a consort, not his queen. I have no power outside of this suite of rooms and even then, it’s limited.

“So please chill because all of this is falling back on me.” Reaching out, I squeeze her hand. “I know y’all meant well. Getting caught cost me what little trust he has for me. Now, I’m back to square one.”

“Man, I’m sorry.” She squeezes my hand back, regret doing nothing to mar her pretty face.

Releasing my grip, I grab the cool glass of mint tea and sip it, letting the refreshing taste soothe me.

“Has he come back since that night?” I’m already shaking my head.

“I saw on the news he’s staying close to the sites instead of coming all the way back here.” I leave out the fact that he could take a helicopter home if he wanted to. He doesn’t. Maybe he doesn’t trust himself to be around me. I don’t trust him being

around me, either.

That night created a chasm between us I'm not sure can be mended. With our attraction, sex is probably the easiest thing between us. Sex is not a cure at all — especially when trust as fragile as ours is broken.

“It’s fine.” I shiver even though it’s not cold, recalling the pure antipathy of his gaze when he accused me of trying to take Ayaan away from him. “It’s probably more convenient for him. It’s better for him not to waste resources coming home every evening.”

“Umhm.” Pursing her lips in a ‘yeah, right’ kind of way, Fi drinks her mint tea and doesn’t comment further.

“Excuse me, Mistress,” I nod, letting the attendant come forward.

“Her majesty would like to join you and Miss Fi for a brief moment.” Smiling at us both, she retreats because it’s not an ask. The queen does not ask, especially to a lowly consort who everyone knows her son only married out of duress. That is what the people believe, and I’ve seen nothing from the palace’s press office to set the record straight. There has been nothing reiterating that he chose me, though both his parents know he kidnapped and forced me here. Like I get defending your son at all costs, lady, but don’t throw me to the wolves in the process.

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It's with these feeling of animus eating at me I watch the queen approaching us with three attendants at her back. I wonder if it was any of them leaking gossip to the press. I wouldn't doubt it. The only person loyal to me is the person rising to bow to Hassan's mom beside me.

I'm much slower to rise for no other reason than to let her know I'm mad.

"Ladies," she smiles warmly, if not a little sadly, at us both.

"Ma'am." We both bow, acknowledging her higher status.

"Please sit with us," I wave to the space across from me as one of her attendants brings over another chair.

"Tea?" I ask after she sits and we do the same, waiting for her to take her seat first.

"Yes, thank you." As a fresh batch of tea is brought, the silence is so thick you could slice it with a knife.

Finally, when the tea and a tray of sfenj — donuts that I have come to love, chocolate and almond ghriba, along with the same cookies made with cardamon, are placed before us. The queen takes us in for a long moment.

"I'm sorry about how you are being treated by the press." I quirk a brow at her words and smile, knowing it doesn't meet my eyes.

"The staff here a loyal to your family." I began only to be cut off when she raises her

hand.

“You are part of this family.” She interjects only to have Fi make a strangled sound, which has both of us looking at her.

“Y’all have a funny way of showing it. Your son kidnapped us then forced Lyric to marry him, only to disrespect her by not giving her the tittle that is hers by right. I know y’all are a little behind on women’s rights over here, but even you know this is not right, ma’am.” Never going to be a diplomat this one, still I’m proud of my friend.

“You are correct, Fi.” The queen acknowledges, then turns to look at me. “It is not my place to tell Hassan what to do. I thought since he chose to bring you into his suites that you all had formed a bond. Word of this altercation never reached His Majesty, The King and I. This is unprecedented — that anyone in the palace would leak our family’s business in this way. We are very sorry and will ferret out the leakers.” Her gaze is unwavering when she gives me her solemn oath. “We are not the British royal family where the Firm works to tear down perceived rivals. No, we Al Rasheeds are family no matter how we came to be.”

It’s not until her words wash over me I realize this is what I have longed for, only it should come from Hassan not his mother.

“I wanted to invite you to come along with me to visit some of those who survived the earth quake. I think it would be good for the people’s morale to have us — the queen and the high consort to visit.”

Not to mention the help to my reputation after taking such PR hit. She doesn’t say it, doesn’t have to. I’ve done enough damage control in my career to know a rehabilitation campaign when I see it. I don’t begrudge her. In fact, I find myself more than little grateful to her.

“I’d be happy to join you. Fi?” I turned to my bestie. “Will you stay with Ayaan while I’m away? Normally, one of us is always here.” She’s already nodding with eagerness before I finish.

“Of course,” she waves with a flourish. “I’ll take care of my nephew, no different than if you were doing a press junket or a charity, event on tour.”

I notice the queen shifts a little uncomfortably at Fi’s reminder of how we were snatched at the start of my tour.” I try to hide the smirk but can’t stop myself from nodding in agreement. One thing my friend is going to do is stand for what’s right.

The realization settles a deep resolve within me. I will have a reckoning with Hassan. I’ve never been a doormat and I’m not going to allow illusions of what could be cloud what actually is. He stole me from life, forced this marriage on me, and then treated me shabbily when things got tough. Sure, people are suffering and instead of allowing me to comfort him he accused me. Not that I could tell him about Fi’s part. That would mean certain death for her, no matter who’s taken a liking to her. I won’t risk her any more than I would any of my other sisters. Because that is what Fi is to me, a sister.

“Jeeze,” I whisper, behind mask the first responders insisted that we use when they briefed us on the way to the site. My gaze snags on greater and greater evidence of the breadth of devastation these poor souls had to endure. The SUV skirts deep pockets of craters and rubble as we go through the city near the epicenter of the earthquake.

The vehicle shakes and rattles as we are taken up a steep ascent to a plateau rising high above the city. We approach a citadel that seems to be throwback to medieval Morocco.

As we arrive, we see masses of people in long lines to receive aid and supplies.

The lines wrap around the building. Families are three deep, many carrying all of their possessions or pull them alongside them in carts.

“This is one of the outpost of one of the king’s ancestors long ago.” This fortress was built here because the Bedouins advised General Darrian this plateau would withstand the great quakes when that they came. They have millennia of history within the oral history of the tribes.” The queen informs me as I take in the sheer enormity of what Hassan and the King have brought together to help the people.

Volunteers work unceasingly, passing out everything from water, medical supplies, food. There is even a line of people sitting and eating food that is served.

“I feel like we are going to be in the way of what the first responders are trying to do here.” I tell the queen as the vehicle pulls to a stop in front of a group of tents that have been erected.

Our security teams are already waiting for us. Having been informed of our expected arrival by the palace.

“Oh no, my dear, the people will be glad to have us. We are here to work and I know from every thing my sons, daughter and Khadijah have told me about your work ethic. This little excursion will be nothing to you.” She assures me with a determined glint in her eyes.

I nearly stumble at her words. Not the unfortunate bit mentioning Hassan’s former fiancée, but the part about him speaking about me at all, let alone about how hard I work. Not that it’s not known the world over.

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“Is that what won you over?” I quirk a brow at her, knowing full well I’m that last person she wanted for her esteemed son. I know Sadiq giving up his position for Lovie-Belle was a serious blow to the Al Rasheed dynasty, but to have Hassan marry a foreigner — let alone one with my perceived reputation must have been just as devastating. If not more so considering the circumstances.

“You accomplished all that you have on your own, my dear, with the way you love my grandson, son, and, ah — care for my beloved Hassan.” Her eyes are warm and somber as she says this, and I can’t help how uncomfortable and silly they make me feel. I actually thought there was hope for us. But after the other night there is nothing left but crushing disappointment where hope used to lie.

“Ah well, I guess we better get to work.” Plastering a smile on my face, I go face the people waiting for our help.

Time goesby so fast I barely notice the sun is setting until the people en masse all gather to pray.

Moving back a respectful distance, I watch them take their evening prayers listening to the lyrical words of the Imam.

When they finish, the people resume their places in line and the volunteers their work.

I’ve moved from helping pass out sundries to helping with the evening meal since most of the volunteers are also now eating. There is a commotion, then more security pours in with teams of seven.

My heart stutters. Biting my lip, I put on my serene public face, having long since taken off the mask the first responders insisted on when the queen and I saw there was no smoke, debris or dust on the plateau that houses the fortress.

I keep my head down as much as possible as I ladle soup, pass out meat, bread, and vegetables among the plates, hoping I'd be lost among the other volunteers and go unnoticed by the new royal arrivals.

I can tell by the way people's tones become hushed and they sit or stand straighter that the king and his heir are approaching our area.

The queen stayed with the clothing, medicine and staples, but I moved among the people hours ago, going wherever I was needed.

Glancing up, I see the king walking among the people, patting them on their shoulders, giving them words of encouragement. Hassan is at his side. They don't see me, and a feeling of relief shrouds me.

Thinking I can step away and get lost before he notices me I turn to Ada the head volunteer in this area to let her know I am leaving when I one of the citizens gestures towards me and the king and Hassan both turn startled eyes my way.

Their expressions couldn't be different. A huge smile graces the king's face as he nods in my direction. I smile and dip my own in acknowledgment, training my eyes on the task, knowing I can't gracefully leave anymore but not before I catch the heard piercing stare of my husband.

I breathe a sigh of relief when neither of them comes in my direction but continue to mingle among the people.

I have no idea how long the queen intends to stay — it's been hours and though I'd

like to tuck Ayaan in I feel a deep sense a purpose being out among the people. It's also well past his bedtime, so rushing back now won't do any good.

Time ticks away and I don't even let way Hassan glowered bother me. I focus on what I came to do — serve.

“Mother,says you haven't taken a break.” The husky tones reaching my ears cause me to spin so fast I almost drop the sweet bun I was about to pass to a small child.

“Ah, well, time has a way of getting away from you when there is a lot to do.” I smile at the little boy whose arm is in a fresh splint, giving him the dessert.

“I'm good.” Alarm makes my voice thready when I see Hassan rolling up his sleeves and donning gloves to pass out food.

He stares at me for a long moment, his jaw ticking. “I know.” His gaze saying more than he ever will.

My heart twists and just as quickly I shove that emotion — foolish hope deep down into the darkest recesses I can find so I don't do anything so dumb as believe he's anything other than the monster he showed me last week.

We work in a companionable silence, serving all the people who want dessert and the deeply aromatic coffee provided from the palace.

“The queen herself oversaw the food provisions.” Ada told me earlier.

After a while, the line dwindles and we stand alone at the serving table.

“Are you ready to leave?” He asks, finally turning to me again, his eyes somber.

“I’ll go find the queen,” I say, moving to slide around him.

“Umm is gone. She worked herself to the bone. Baba took her with him before I came over here.” Dread settles in my tummy. Making a mental note to let Her Majesty know the rule of when we come together, we leave together. I allow her beast of a son to lead me through throngs of people to his awaiting car.

“Did you eat?” Hassan asks after we’ve been underway for a few minutes.

“I did earlier.” Not mentioning it was hours before when I was with Fi. I don’t want him asking after me, pretending he cares. I’ll see after myself the way I’ve always had to. Having learned long ago the people who are supposed to have your back don’t and the people who are supposed to protect you end up hurting you the worse.

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A sharp pain twists in my lower left leg. Groaning low, I grab the aching cramp, trying to massage the knot away. Then another cramp pierces my side. Yep, I definitely need to start moving my body more. There is no way a little outing like this should have me bowed over like I'm an octogenarian.

"Here let me." Hassan reaches for me. My tummy growls and his gaze shoots up to mine.

I rear back like he's trying to stab me instead of massage me. "I got it." Concentrating on my leg, trying to apply enough pressure to ease the ache, but it's dang near impossible when my side is also trying to end me.

"Lyric." With a tone hard as steel, he pries my leg away from me, settling it on his hard thigh.

Wordless and tense, he works the cramp out of my leg. His hands are so gentle yet firm tears prickle behind my eyelids.

I'm still sitting awkwardly when he finishes. Obviously I must look pitiful because he says, "Come, let me ease you, jameela," in words so soft and sweet they immediately melt my resolve.

I don't have to move because he drags me over to him, pulling my body into his lap, cradling me as he soothes the ache in my body.

His gruff promise, "I'll have someone come and pamper you tomorrow, little wife," is that last thing I hear before I drift off.

Chapter Fourteen

PRINCESS OF THE PEOPLE

LYRIC

“Shukran” the little girl smiles her thanks up at me as I pass her a bundle of clothes to go along with the care package that Fi has already given her parents. Nodding their thanks, the young family moves to the other volunteers who will give them a voucher for housing, prepaid debit card for food and other necessities she and the family may need.

“They love you. Maybe as much as the people back home. You’re doing so much good. You always do.” Turning, I look up into Fi’s smiling face. Her words a balm to my soul.

Going out several times a week to help those affected by the earthquake has restored not only my reputation, but my mental health. I don’t care how gilded a cage is, it’s still a cage. I can use the vast resources of the palace to help people as much as I can. The press coverage has grudgingly acknowledged my work, even though they constantly question my motives. Yet once the people come in contact with me, they seem to brighten towards me.

“I’m not mad about it.” I quip, smiling at the next family in line. “You know we don’t know how to do half measures.” Filling the parcels with goods and clothing. I notice their teen daughter holding her phone, looking at me with hope.

“Would you like to take a picture with me?” I ask, through the helpful translator Indigo, the palace, has provided. How this girl ended up here working in the Palace is a question for the ages and I can’t wait to get some time alone with her to ask. However, as usual, my time is never my own. And to be seen gossiping with the staff

is highly frowned upon by the palace officials.

“She says yes, if it pleases you, mistress,” Indigo provides with a cheeky smile, knowing I hear that phrase often enough to know that particular phrase. My language skills are getting better, though some of the nuances are tricky with the various dialects. Still, I am determined. I don’t like the fact that people could be speaking about me in negative terms in my own household when I’m not aware.

Scooting past Indigo, I go over to the girl. We do a couple of selfies. My little teen fangirls posting on their social media has done so much to help me re-establish my place as the Empress. All the love and personal stories have nearly undone the bad press I’ve gotten since my shot-gun wedding to their beloved prince.

After hugs to the girl and her mom, I move back behind the table with Fi and Indigo.

“The line is thinning. Do you want to take a break?” Fi asks. Checking the veracity of their words, I shake my head. “Nah, there’s not that many people. We can finish, then we can head home.” Funny that I think of the palace as my home when it should be anything but. There is still gossip about Hassan and my relationship making it to the tabloids and gossip blogs. Feeling like I had no choice I gave Fi permission to each out to Joi to try to counter some of the narrative of me being a golddigging, diva who trapped their noble prince only to make him so miserable that he won’t even come home to the palace his family’s inhabited for millennia.

Turning back to the people, I try to push down the hurt just thinking of it evokes. Since the night a couple of weeks ago, when I rode home with Hassan, he’s been a ghost. Only seeing Ayaan when I’m not there.

The times when I know he’s in residence, I hesitate to intrude, thinking of the last time I tried to reach out to him and the awful fight that ensued.

“Oh, you’re sad again.” Indigo observes, looking from me to the people.

“The smile that you’ve pasted on doesn’t help, sis. It makes you look even more pitiful. Stop letting that motherfucker ruin your day.” Fi’s admonishment does the job intended. Snapping me out of my morose thoughts and shocking the innocence out of Indigo.

“You’re a mess.” I tell her. “You can’t be talking like that around Indigo.” Nudging her side, I add. “Apologize.”

“Sorry, Indigo.” Fi says not meaning it at all.

“You’re so hoodly.” Indigo quips back, rolling her eyes.

“It’s hood and you have no idea.” Fi counters, blasting the new arrivals with a dazzling smile.

“Mistress.” I look up at one of the Red Crescent workers approaching me.

“Yes?” I asked the woman who I put to a task when the second time I volunteered.

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“We found him.” She smiles at me.

“You have?” I all but squeal at her words.

“If you will come with me. I can introduce you to Zayn.” She says over her shoulder, beckoning me to follow her.

“His parents?” I ask speeding up to follow her quickened pace as Indigo and Fi fall in behind me.

“Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un,” my heart sinks as she says the words of condolence — “We belong to Allah and to Him we shall return.”

“Does he have any family?” She shakes her head as we enter the building that houses families in transition.

“They were all lost.” Opening the door for us, she allows us to enter a small room where a little boy who can't be more than three plays quietly on the floor with puzzles.

“Zayn,” Indigo translates as she calls over to him. “Someone very special would like to meet you.”

My kaftan pools around me as I get on the little boy's level to greet him.

His little smile is warm as he says, “As-salamu ?Alaykum,,” in a still baby like way.

He giggles at my response. I spend the next few moments getting acquainted with Zayn, playing with puzzles. He's thoughtful in helping me place the pieces and so clever with figuring them out. He even laughed at my corny antics.

"I think Ayaan would love him." I tell Fi and Indigo after we settle into the car and head back to the palace.

"Um.." Fi casts a worried look at the driver. The partition is down. Pressing the button to raise it I sign, "What?"

"Other than, I know like hell you ain't thinking of bringing that baby into that mess of a palace?" Her eyes round like she knows I've lost all sense.

"He doesn't have a family." I shrug.

"And you think that bringing him into this situation is what's best? I know you love Josephine Baker, but you sound really ridiculous right now" she shakes her head in stiff disapproval. "No ma'am, Hassan is not even speaking to you."

"And why is that Fi?" I charge, feeling like she's attacking me.

"I was trying to help us out of this situation." Crossing her arms, she turns away.

"I know that, and I'm willing to take those consequences. It's just —" My words choke.

"You're the one suffering." She tries to finish, but I'm already shaking my head.

"No. I just can't be so bogged down in what I'm going through that I forget about other people and that little baby doesn't have anyone. We both know what that's like — at least until we found each other." I hear a sniff and for realize Indigo's been here

the entire time witnessing our fight and subsequent make up. If she's the mole, it'll be all over the blogs, but knowing she's had access to way worse information about me like walking in on me sobbing my eyes out after hearing that Hassan had taken Ayaan for the day without even greeting me that never leaked reassures me she can be trusted.

"Sorry Mistress, I love the way you two love each other. Such good sisters." Her eyes are wet with tears.

I'm second from drawing her in for a hug when there's a loud screech, then a boom. Our car rattles like a tin can, then starts careening down the hill the SUV and the caravan of security vehicles ahead and behind us are traveling.

"Argh," we crying in unison all of us clinging together as the driver loses control then tries to right us, making a sharp turn in the opposite direction only for another boom and screech to hit us sending us sailing over the edge of the hill.

We'd been told to wear our seatbelts, no exceptions. We complied because one thing having a child brings into context is the brevity of life and the chances you are willing to take before you become a parent seem selfish at best once you hold the life of a little child and all their hope for the future in your hands.

Still, the seat belt does nothing against the jarring viciousness of the turbulence we experience until the vehicle comes to a pitiful stop at the bottom.

"Fi, Indigo?" Disoriented, I look around at my companions. Both are unconscious. Indigo's beautiful face has a vicious slash going down the side of it. Blinking, I feel wet stickiness sliding down my nose. Reaching up to wipe it away, I smell the copper scent of my blood even before I bring my fingers into my line of sight.

Looking to the left, I squeeze my eyes shut against the pain stabbing at my forehead.

Blindly reaching up, I feel for the cause. “Ow.” Jerking back my hand, I see where I’ve cut my fingers. I have a shard of glass sticking out of my forehead. I grab the scarf I’d been wearing and use it to pull the shard free.

Blood pours from my head before I can staunch it. “Ugh,” I moan in pain, pressing the wadded silk against my forehead. Holding it steady with trembling hands, I wrap the scarf tightly around my head. I hope that will stop the flow.

Now, I turn again. “Fi.” I scream, seeing my friend slumped over against the door. There is blood residue beside her head on the tempered glass.

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“Fi.” Now it comes out like a pitiful whimper, one that screams of fear.

Knowing better than to jostle or try to move either of them, I look ahead. “Asif.” My stoic driver, who I’m pretty sure didn’t like me, is half way out of the windshield. His head sits at an awkward angle and his eyes are open, glassy as he stares off into nothing.

Hot tears spill down my face. He’s been with me every day. Silent but always on time. Always carrying the packages of gifts and crafts, people have given me, Ayaan and Hassan without complaint. This man has a family and people he cares for and now they’ve lost him because of me.

I speak a blessing over him, then squeezing through the partition to get into the front seat. Craning my sore neck, I look where we came down the hill and my heart stops. A full on firefight is going on. The top of the hill has a contingent of the palace guard and my personal security in battle with men dressed in fatigues. They could be professionals or a militant group, but the battle that’s waging is going to cost a lot of lives.

My team is not that big. The other group, in contrast, has three times as many people. Fear burns a hole in my chest as I think of Ayaan waiting on me and me never returning to him.

I don’t know they noticed that I’m not among the group of SUVs taking fire from the combatants or if they think I’m already dead, but no one is making a move towards us down here in the crumpled car.

There is a chime. Looking up, I see that it is Asif's phone peeking out the pocket of his suit pants.

Grabbing it, I press the button.

"Is she dead?" It takes me a moment to decipher the cultured Arabic coming in over the phone.

"Brother? — Brother?"

Not wanting to give the dastard any indication of my wellbeing, I sit quietly as he calls for his brother twice more before hanging up.

Betrayal sits like a hot coal in my heart. He hated me. Wanted me dead and still help me without complaint every day.

That kind of treachery I'm used to in the industry I work in but not in my own house — at least not since I became an adult. If I could unshed the tears I shed for him a few moments prior, I would.

I press the icon for the palace, knowing I'm taking a chance with my life. What if one of his cohorts answers and lets the other traitors know that I'm alive? I'm about to change my mind when the phone answers.

"Asif? Are you well? Is the royal consort safe? Their Royal Highnesses demand to know."

The urgency of the words that I can pick out through the rushing bombardment is enough to encourage me to speak.

"Hello? This is Lyric. I'm alive."

A few days later...

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

“This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine, this little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine —”

“Mistress.” Looking up, I see Aliah at the entrance of the guest suite the queen had set up for Fi after the palace doctor and specialist declared there was nothing we could do but wait for her to wake up.

She’s suffered a severe concussion and dislocated shoulder from the accident — correction attack. Indigo’s fared better if such a thing could even be said after having her beautiful face slashed so viciously. The pain in her eyes made me sick with shame. No one deserves that.

I’ve been by both their sides since I got the all clear from the doctors. Bringing Ayaan with me each time as I’ve traversed the suite of guest rooms adjacent to the other.

Ayaan made Indigo smile every time we visited her and today she even joined in as we sang with her. She even asked for the newest copy of a fantasy, Oathbound that she heard was all the rage back home.

All her enthusiasm even has me — a dark and urban romance reader interested.

“Yes?” I ask Moussa and Fariq’s sister, knowing she also gathering information for her brothers not only about Fi, who Fariq’s besotted by but also for the royal family about me. Their concern is nice, but I won’t be trusting anyone in this palace until the culprits are caught.

Somehow, all the attackers are dead either at the hands of my security or by suicide. A little bit too convenient. Making matters worse, I've been regulated to my suites and garden at the prince's directive, which was only reconsidered after I appealed to the queen.

Hassan is a fucking tyrant, and that's the nicest thing I can say about him at the moment. Not once has he come to check on me or my friends since the attack.

His mom contends he was distraught when they brought me in unconscious and stayed by my side as I was treated.

However, I've not seen him once since I woke the next day. Only told that I couldn't see my friends until the symptoms of my concussion were alleviated.

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Umm, as she insists I call her, says he's been busy rooting out those responsible. Still, I can't help but think if he really cared, he'd have come seen about me once.

"His Royal Highness, Prince Hassan, has requested Prince Ayaan be brought to him for an audience." She steps towards me and my arm instinctively tightens around my son. It's not that I don't trust her. I do. What I don't trust or like is how Hassan is carving out time with my son away from me, as though he is conditioning Ayaan to being with us separately. He's been divvying up the time between us and though I noticed it earlier, I thought it was because of how hectic his schedule was and him still being angry over what he believed I had done. Now, I see how wrong I was. This is a deliberate move on his part.

My only other question is, if he's doing it so that we maintain separate residences or he intends to take my child from me? An icky feeling tells me it is the later.

"I'll take him to his father." I coolly inform her.

"Mistress—"

"I said what I said, Aliah. Please lead the way." Giving her a determined smile, I nod for her to take us to Hassan.

"Thank you," I say as we enter the suite we all share. He must have really not expected me to leave Fi's side if he chose the rooms he's all but fled to spend time with our son.

"Baba," Ayaan singsongs squirming to get down so he can toddle over to his dad.

“Abn. My sweet precious boy.” Hassan gets down on his haunches with his arms spread wide so Ayaan can run into them.

Sweeping him up, he kisses his cheek, closing his eyes, as he hugs him. I can’t take my eyes off them. I haven’t seen this display since before the horrible fight we had. My nose stings from the emotions that threaten to break me as I watch the unfiltered display of love.

I never see him soften. Not even when he is with his parents, though I know they love him. He always seems to be aware of the expectation of his position and never allows himself to be seen as weak. He’s not even been vulnerable when we’ve been intimate. The closest he came was that first time. After the debacle that followed, I couldn’t allow myself to be unguarded either, or at least tried not to. I still cringe, thinking I could trust him even a little with my heart.

Startled, I have to stop myself from taking a step back, when somber eyes open and reach mine.

“It’s almost time for prayer. You’ve taken him from his lessons all day.” The accusation is like a slap to my face.

“He’s not even two, Hassan,” I try to keep my tone calm and not cuss his ass out, in front of our son.

“He will be king.” His voice is firm though he smiles, standing Ayaan on his feet. An opportunity our son uses to run around the room at a breakneck pace. How he misses the tables and ottomans, I’ll never know.

“Son,” he calls to Ayaan, stopping him in his little tracks. “It is time to pray.”

I sit amongst the cushions watching them prepare and then step out onto the veranda,

since they don't have time to make it to the palace mosque.

Time got away from me as I visited with Indigo and Fi. I know how important teaching Ayaan to be observant is to him. Still, he could have sent for him earlier, knowing I'm consumed with worry for my friends.

No sooner than they come back is food brought in and set up for us. The aromas remind me none too gently that I've not eaten, not that I've had an appetite for anything other than coffee since the waking up and discovering my best-friend is in a coma.

After giving thanks, we dig into the sumptuous fare of roasted turkey, veggies, honey glazed rolls and various other dishes. The olives are my favorite, along with the olive oil drizzled hummus.

"Yummy, Umm?" Ayaan little voice has me smiling despite my worry. Children have a way of making all the troubles plaguing you a little less consequential for a while.

"Yes, hunnie. Is yours yummy?" he nods vigorously then goes about naming the dishes in Arabic and English like he's been taught.

Hassan watches the interplay between us and I can't help but notice the look of longing in his eyes. Seeing me watch him, his gaze shutters, then clearing his throat, he wipes his full lips. "I'd like to speak with you later."

"Okay," I shrug, communicating that I've been here the entire time.

"Play?" Ayaan asks, his cheeks flushed from eating and hope in his jade eyes.

"Yeah, let's get some of that energy out." I sweep him up before Hassan answers. This is the new routine since he decided to stay away nights following the

earthquake. We have a very active and inquisitive son who wanted to know where his Baba was and why he wasn't here. Letting him roam the gardens at night did wonders to distract him.

We are already outside chasing bubbles when he joins us.

Chapter Fifteen

DADDY'S HOME

LYRIC

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“Wassup?” Tucking my feet beneath me on the sofa, I ask as if I couldn’t care less. Which is kinda true. There are rumors swirling around our relationship. Some reports are that the attack was an inside job from the palace. My heart chilled as I read blog after salacious blog stating all the reasons why their most benevolent prince would be well rid of the American usurper.

If there was anything left of my heart to shatter about the betrayal, I would have expired from all the reports.

I can’t stifle the sigh as I wait for his response. His gaze sharpens as he expels his exasperation in a similar manner.

“You will not be going back to volunteer with the earthquake survivors.” He’s standing as I sit, but why does it feel like he’s looking down his nose at me?

“Why?” I demand, adding as I stand to face him, though he still towers over me. “Why am I being punished by someone else’s actions?”

“Your little publicity stunt cost the lives of my men,” he snaps.

My face heats like he’s slapped me. “First of all, it was the queen’s idea. I kept going because I wanted to help people.” I leave out the fact that it was the first thing that I’ve found purpose in outside of being Ayaan’s mom in a long, long while. Performing is my gift, but reaching out and helping the people devastated by this tragedy gave me such an amazing feeling. It’s not for myself but for others that had me going out there every day. It truly made me happy and I think he knew that and for that reason alone wants to take it from me.

“Sure Empress, I saw the social media posts you have your little fan girls posting — Princess Of The People, is it?” He scoffs of disdain making his face harden to an almost blank mask.

“What? You’re scared they may like me more than you?” I quip, trying not to let his cruel assertions further mar the work I’ve done.

“Oh no,” he huffs, “I have no fear of that little diva. You need all the help you can get.”

“You sound like a jealous little bitch, Hassan. Why don’t you go back to whatever euro-trash flavor of the week you have waiting for you in your flat in Marrakesh, or is it Rabat? Casablanca?” I shrug, unbothered. “Thank them for me, won’t you? I’m tired of the mediocrity, tink.” Forcing a fake giggle, I flounce away.

Hard fingers curl around my arm, snapping me back to his chest.

“Mediocre, huh?” he growls down at me. “Seems like you need a reminder of how hard I make you come.”

I shiver. Immediately my need to save myself from ruination at his hands kicks in. Swinging wildly, I catch the side of his head.

“Motherfucker—” he swears loudly. I pause all of two seconds, my eyes rounding at the way his ear reddens. I don’t wait, I peel off in the direction of my — our bedroom.

Just as I slam shut, I see his face full of malicious determination charging towards me.

Heart thudding, I back up, anticipating the chaos about to ensue.

No sooner than I clear the door does it come flying off the hinges.

“Are you fucking insane?” I scream as he stalks toward me.

“Yes. Yes, the fuck I am wife.” His strides eat up the distance. He doesn’t stop, only stoops to pick me up, tossing me on the bed.

“It’s time you learn how to be a proper wife.” He settles on the bed, dragging me over his lap.

“You’re like a fucking child in need of constant discipline.” He growls, pulling my kaftan up over my hips and off my body. Cool air touches my bare bottom.

“No panties?” I can feel the heaviness of his dick pressing against my abdomen as I lay over his lap.

“It’s too warm.” I mumble, feeling heavy hands caress my bottom.

“Huh? Makes things easier. Fuck. You’ve been walking around all this time like this?” He muses, his voice deepening to an almost primitive gutturalness.

I don’t give him the satisfaction of a reply.

“Let’s commence with you discipline, shall we?” He’s all business. I’m not so sure I like that.

“Ha—” my words break from me as he begins his punishment with a ruthless determination, giving me no reprieve.

“We. Don’t. Hit.” He says with finishing smacks after what seems like an eon. “Say it.”

“We don’t hit.” I hiccup around the pressure in my chest built up trying to keep from sobbing, or goodness forbid begging him to stop.

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“Good girl.” He whispers, rubbing my sore bottom.

“Let me go.” I try to squirm off his lap. My anger spiking from being brought so low.

“Pulling me around so that I’m facing him, he makes me meet his fierce gaze.

“Never.” He gives me a little shake. “Never. Do you understand that, Lyric? I will never let you go.”

“Why?” I all but sob. Squeezing my hands into fists so I don’t give into the desire — no need to cobble his ass. I look him dead in his eyes,”Y-you don’t even want me. You never have not since that night.”

Silence falls between us, thick and heavy. I watch his eyes darken, raking in as much of me as he can see.

“Now, wife, who was the one dead set on breaking this family up? I lay with you every night until I discovered your treachery. I stayed away because I knew the moment I was within five feet of you I’d want to taste you, be buried so deep inside you that you wouldn’t know where you ended and I began.” He shifts me then so can feel the evidence of his desire.

“I see you still need convincing,” he murmurs, pushing me up as he slides down until I’m straddling his face.

“I’ve dreamed about this, Lyric,” he whispers against. “Damn, your pussy glistening. I see spanking your ass has added benefits.”

“Ohmygoodness,” I moan, my toes curl as his tongue traces my contours. He dips his tongue deep, lapping my cream before gently sucking one lip, then the other into his mouth.

Wiggling away from the intensity, I come up against the strength of his hands holding me in place.

“Uh-uh, take this tongue lashing like the little diva you try to be,” he admonishes right before he tongues and sucks on my clit with deliberation and perfection.

Slowly, I start rocking against him, rubbing my pussy against his face. Gripping my hips, he keeps me steady, making me take every delicious lick of his tormenting tongue.

“H-Hassan,” I keen, fucking against his mouth as his tongue fucks deep into my pussy. Stars dance behind my eyes. His growl in response sends me over the edge. Clamping down on my errant hips, he makes me take everything he gives. My pussy clenches. Grabbing the headboard, I fuck his face in abandon.

My heart thuds like I’ve been in a marathon. It’s been weeks, but it feels very much like that first time.

I’m jello as I slip down to the bed beside him.

He wipes his face, sucking his wet fingers into his mouth. “No more about me not wanting you.” His gaze is steady, but the shadows remain.

I want to tell him so bad — make him understand, but I can’t betray Fi like that. I don’t know what to say and from the way his expression closes, I know I’m not giving him the answer he needs.

After a tense moment, he moves to leave.

“Hassan.” I choke out, grabbing his arm. His trouble gaze meets him.

“I don’t want to leave. I want Ayaan to have a family.” I say, managing to keep the dregs of my pride.

In one swift moment, he crowds me, pushing me into the mattress. “Promise me.” He demands.

Meeting his gaze, I give my word. “I promise.”

“Promise me you won’t try to leave and take Ayaan away from me.” Pressing his forehead against mine.

“I vow it.” Drowning in the vulnerability I’ve never seen in him, I promise. It’s even easier when he kisses me like I give him life. I wait for the last moment to close my eyes, not wanting to miss this moment.

He drinks me in with the same intensity. Pulling back, he bites his lip, his stare now marked with a little cruelty.

I making up for what I missed, what I was forced to deny myself.

He rips his shirt off, tossing it off the side of the bed, his muscles ripping with every movement. He looks like he’s been working in the sun. The only sign of his hard days laboring with the rescue teams are the concave dips to his belly and the harden tendons of his arms, with the veins sticking out in sharp relief.

Shifting, he removes the rest of his clothes. His massive dick rises hard and strong against his tight abs.

Leaning forward, I dip my head, taking the glistening tip into my mouth.

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“Damn, jameela, you do that so good.” He thrusts into my mouth, making me take him deeper. Long tapered fingers smooth down the line of my back as he fucks into my mouth.

‘Cease,’ he commands. “When I come, it will be in your tight, juicy pussy. Lie back, little diva.”

I do a little primly still not used to this type of intimacy.

“Let me see that pretty ass pussy, lil’ mama,” he growls.

His stare stalks over me like a lion tracking a gazelle as I do as he bids.

“Open that motherfucker, Ma.” Another command, another acquiesce.

Leaning forward, he braces his forearm, positioning himself at my entrance.

“So soft, so wet,” He murmurs, his eyes trained on where we meet.

Rubbing the heavy head of his dick against my sensitive flesh, he teases me until I’m aching to get closer to the feeling he’s evoking.

“Please.” Reaching out, I try to draw him closer. Grabbing my hand he kisses my knuckles then opens my hand licking my palm. “How prettily my wife begs.”

A wicked gleam lights his eyes as he places my hand on his straining dick.

“Put me where you want me, wife,” our gazes tangle. I see the way his jaw ticks, not knowing if it’s from the emotion I see in his eyes that he dare not share. I’m much the same way. Taking the easy way instead of meeting the challenge I see in those beautiful depths I look between us seeing how wet I’ve made him, the glossy head of his dick pearls as I pump it.

Opening wider I place him at my entrance pressing up to take him inside.

“Fuck,” he groans, driving in a little, stretching me. “Still so tight, Lyric?”

Nodding, I bite my lip then lick away the sting, anxious to please him. “I’m good.” I promise not wanting him to stop.

“You ready?” I know he can tell how wet I am for him, but I know he wants my words. Knowing he needs this reassurance because he thinks I was repudiating all of him with the attempted escape Fi orchestrated, I give him the words he needs. “Always for you, husband.”

A wild grin spreads across his face. He shifts back, then drives inside of me — deep.

Whimpering, I take all of him without complaint. His dick is a steel rod pressing with relentless determination. My muscle strain to resist despite all he’s done to get me ready.

‘Damn, baby, she choking me like she’s mad I stayed away.’ He stills, pressing his forehead against mine once he’s buried so deep I feel him in my right beneath my heart.

“So fucking good.” his mouth covers mine. I can’t help but agree while he drinks my lips in. His tongue dips into my mouth, tasting me and giving me access to the firmness of his. Sinking into the pleasure he’s evoking with his mouth and the very

deliberateness of his firm fingers working between us, I wrap my arms around his neck, holding him to me. Wrapping my legs around him, I feel him go deeper, smiling when he shudders.

Drawing back, his gaze never leaves mine as he starts fucking me like it's his ministry.

"Ohmygoodness." Eyes fluttering when he rolls his hips, I try to lose myself in the sensation, not wanting to meet his fierce gaze.

"Husband," he demands, fucking so hard that my teeth click. "Tell your husband how good I'm making you feel, wife. Drawing my leg higher, he angles deep, hitting my deepest spot. "Say it" he grits." Making my legs shake.

"Husband, you make me feel so goo—" my words cut short when he hammers against my spot, shattering me, turning my last words into a keening cry as pleasure breaks around me.

Still thrusting, Hassan gives me no quarter. Grabbing the headboard, he drives into me.

"You've denied me too long, Lyric. I'm fucking you all night." My hands slip down, feeling the way his ass flexes as his hips drive and roll into me.

"Don't stop," I beg, arching to meet him thrust for thrust. He doesn't. He takes us higher, reaching the area I never knew existed.

Bodies slick, we glide against each other. My nipples graze his chest. Pleasure sparks through every aroused inch of my body, pushing me closer and closer. I almost fear the precipice he's taking me to. My muscles squeeze around him spasmodically as another climax threatens. Adding pressure of my own, I finally meet his gaze again.

Darkened by desire and something more he eyes me with heavy purpose. “Come with me this time, babe.” I whisper, keeping my eyes on him.

Bending down, he covers my mouth again with a toe curling tantalizing kiss as his hips slam into me again, and again. Giving me no reprieve, he fucks me into another stratosphere. Flooding my pussy, he joins me with my name on his lips.

Rolling over, he pulls me on top of him, proving he's a man of his word, starting all over again.

Chapter Sixteen

THE RECKONING ~THE BLACK SITE

HASSAN

The smell of blood is pungent. The briny, brackishness of the water fills my nose. A lesser man would probably feel queasy, but this is light work for me. A reminder of my responsibility as a man, a husband and one day sovereign. If an Al Rasheed passes down a death sentence, he carries it out. And these in particular I take great pleasure in doing. They dare make an attempt on Lyric's life. For that, they will pay with their own. But first, these motherfuckers have to suffer.

"We do this the old way," I told Moussa right before we began and the unhinged motherfucker smiled wildly.

There's nothing I like better than putting work in. Finding and putting an end to Asif's cohorts is exactly that.

If I could bring his ass back from the deed the car crashing did in breaking his traitorous neck, I would. To think I placed that which is most scared to me in the world to that man's hands only to have him collude with cowards to take her life galls me. It's unforgivable. My atonement will never cease until they all breathe dirt.

“Flip him.”

Slowly Moussa cranks the wheel, and the body strapped to the X carved from a baobab tree is turned upside down. Pulling out a thirteen inch nail I’ve had specially forged from iron, I move over to the blind figure idly swinging my favorite mallet. His gouged out eyes are black holes. He will wonder forever lost in the afterlife. He’s also be looking for his fucking head, but I can’t get ahead of myself. I have tasks ahead of me.

His body lurches when he senses me nearing. I roll my eyes as he twists and screams like the bitch ass coward he is.

This is more for effect than anything on my part. He’s going to spill his guts. They all do. Everyone breaks — everyone. Only not at the same time.

Normally, I can be a patient man, but I want to be with my wife and son.

She tried to leave you. The insidious whispers reminding me.

It doesn’t matter, she’s mine. I counter stepping up to the now slumping figure — poor thing has tired himself out. Driving the thickly forged nail through his foot and into the wood base, I smile, relishing the crunch of bone as I shatter his foot. In quick succession, I move to the other, damn near tearing the appendage apart. Maybe it’s the angle, but his baby toe drops to the cement. I kick it over to the three men waiting their turn. It’s almost comical the way they dance away from it as best they can, bound as they are.

“Mine. You dared to harm that which is mine.”

I walk back to the table, taking my time to choose another nail. Palming it. I address the other men assigned the task of forming the team to carry out the attack on Lyric’s

caravan.

“Now. What would possess you to move against your sovereign that way?” I muse not to the babbling idiot who’s near drowned in his own blood from the gash where his tongue used to be — Asif’s first cousin.

The others, more of his kin, huddled in the corner awaiting their turn on the X.

They raise their arms as best they can over their heads, trying to show obeisance.

Casting my gaze to Moussa, I watch him smirk. As if on cue, they fall to their knees. Pleading for their lives. Sheep. Disgusting.

“I’ll make this easy for you, gentleman — or not,” Looking at the array of instruments before me I take out the skinner, bone scrapper, gut hook knife, a double handle fishing knife and a good old buck knife all hand-forged in Damascus steel.

I hear a whimper. The small group shifts when one of them wets his pants.

“Now, you are going to die. That is a given. However, your families will be allowed to live. Something I think whoever put you to this task thought little about when they sought to kill my wife.”

“Speak.” Moussa barks in a thunderous tone.

“Asif, said it was you, Your Highness. He said you wanted to be rid of the High Consort. You thought she was a disgrace and brought shame upon the Al Rasheed line —”

“What?” My voice is soft. Pure rage making it so.

“That she is a grave haram. That you wished her to die and to make it look like an attack from a separatist group.”

“And you believed that, or was it the five hundred thousand dirhams that convince you?” Bored because I’m so used to some idiot saying they did something because it was my wish, as if this lowly cunt could ever know the mind of a king. That in itself is insult enough.

“See this problem with scum like you. You think you are too clever by half. Why would His Highness use you when he has men such as me?” Moussa seems to take affront at having his hard work questioned. Walking over to the group, he quickly snaps the one who dared offend him’s neck.

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The man's body slumps to the ground.

"Temper." I tsk, going back to laying out more instruments of torture.

My watch chimes. Read the update from Fariq.

The high Consort has been visiting Fi and the young woman, Indigo. Prince Ayaan is napping but had morning lessons with his mother. Then they played in the garden. All is well. You must make an appearance at the glad being thrown by Princess Amani and Khadijah.

"Damn," I mutter, knowing my fun has to be cut short and not for something I'd rather be doing, like watching my wife and son dance in a shower of bubbles, like the other day.

"Come play with us." She teased and even though I was still livid with her. I couldn't deny her. I can never say no to this woman. Hell, she gave me the greatest gift a man would ever hope for. Still, I want more. I want Lyric Al Rasheed with every breath I breathe. She and Ayaan are all I think of.

The need to see them eats at me and with it the bitter hatred that someone tried to snatch them away.

Taking my Sig out of its holster, flipping the safety, I go over to the remaining men, giving them a death far more merciful than they deserve.

"What?" Stopping short when I see the frown Moussa bears.

“Why’d you let them off so easily?”

“I have an event and my family awaits.” I pat his shoulder, dialing the number for the wet team.

“You’ll understand when you have a family.” Ignoring his surly ass while I make quick work of putting my toys away.

Chapter Seventeen

CAN’T CATCH BREAK

LYRIC

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT

for the

_____ District of _____

) California 5th

Plaintiff Black Rock Entertainment and Tours

)

v. Civil Action No.

) 7779311121104

)

Defendant

) Lyric AL Rasheed Professionally known as Lyric, Empress and all know aliases

SUBPOENA TO APPEAR AND TESTIFY

AT A HEARING OR TRIAL IN A CIVIL ACTION

To: Lyric AL RASHEED

YOU ARE COMMANDEDto appear in the United States district court at the time,
date, and place set forth below

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to testify at a hearing or trial in this civil action. When you arrive, you must remain at the court until the judge or a court

officer allows you to leave.

Place: Courtroom No.: 354

Date and Time: June 6, 2025

You must also bring with you the following documents, electronically stored information, or objects(leave blank if

not applicable):TRAVEL ITINERARY, CONTRACT, MARRIAGE LICENSE, BUSINESS CALENDAR

The following provisions of Fed. R. Civ. P. 45 are attached – Rule 45(c), relating to the place of compliance; Rule 45(d), relating to your protection as a person subject to a subpoena; and Rule 45(e) and (g), relating to your duty to respond to this subpoena and the potential consequences of not doing so.

Date:March 20, 2025

CLERK OF COURT, Erika Gonzalez

The name, address, e-mail address, and telephone number of the attorney representingBlack Rock Entertainment and Tours, who issues or requests this subpoena, are:Preston Crochan, III, Esq.

Notice to the person who issues or requests this subpoena

If this subpoena commands the production of documents, electronically stored information, or tangible things before trial, a notice and a copy of the subpoena must be served on each party in this case before it is served on the person to

whom it is directed. Fed. R. Civ. P. 45(a)(4).

“What the hell?” I look at the subpoena I’ve just pulled from the packet handed to me from one of the place attendants.

I need my phone so I can call Terrence. I’ve used Black Rock for my tours, so I know he’s felt this was his last resort.

My phone was confiscated as soon as I deplaned, so I couldn’t contact him.

“Fuck,” I swear, even more viciously this time.

“It must be terrible if for you to say that five times in a row, friend.”

Jumping to my feet, hearing the scratchy words from Fi, I drop the packet on the floor ignoring the way they scatter. She’s awake and that’s all that matters.

“Fi,” I’m already crying. “Doctor —s-sorry,” I drop my voice down to a less jarring tone when she winces.

“Hey, hunnie,” I sit beside her on the bed.

“Hey, you.” A smile spreads across her beautiful face. “If you sing, This Little Light Of Mine ever again, I’m strangling you.” Her attempted smile breaks as a torrent of coughs shake her slim frame.

After quickly pouring water from the bedside carafe, I press the straw against her lips.

“Slowly,” I admonish, not wanting her to bring it back up in the next few seconds.

“What happened?” she asks after a few sips.

“Madam?” Looking up, I see the doctor at the foot of the bed as the rest of her all female team is filing in.

“I’ll catch you up after Dr. Bint Aaziz checks you out.” Feeling her squeeze my hand in return is encouraging. I move back to give the team that’s been on standby the access they need to Fi.

“How is she?” I turn to the sound to my right as I exit the room. Fariq stands in a military at ease position. Any misgivings I had about his feeling for my friend have quickly been put to rest since the accident. He’s been by her side alongside me every day. Moussa has taken over their shared duty as Hassan’s body man.

“She just woke up and can barely speak. The doctor came in right after she asked what happened.” I inform him going over to the refreshment table the staff put out for us like they have every day as we’ve kept vigil.

“Ahh,” he nods, a troubled expression spilling over his face. I can see the hesitation and hope emerge.

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“Do you think she’ll want to see me?” I’m already nodding. I’d made sure she looked good when I came in this morning. We made a promise to each other back when we were thirteen that if either of us ever went into a coma, the other would make sure we always had our hair and faces done. I was always okay with a natural look but Fi maintained she wanted the full treatment. So in keeping with that promise I came in here and did her makeup after her morning skin care and made sure every night I did her five step routine. My bestie is vain as hell.

“I think she’ll love that.” I assure him pouring us both a coffee. It’s sweeter than I remembered, but I could be the new beans. The distinctive taste I’m used to seems a little off, but having my coffee perfect is the least of my priorities right now.

He nods somberly before looking around in a little awkward manner. As much as we have passed each other on our way to and from Fi’s room, this is the most we’ve ever spoken to each other.

Handing him a coffee, I offer, “Perhaps you will be able to go back to your detail once you’ve gotten the all clear.”

He quirks a brow at this, shaking his head. “I don’t think so. I’ve been compromised.”

“Excuse me?” My tone elevates in disbelief at Hassan being biased against his relationship with my friend.

“Oh, nothing like that.” Waving away my assumption, he cracks a rare smile. “Palace intrigues and the subsequent fall out is not good for our Fi.”

Immediately, I knew he was referring to Fi's escape attempt.

"She told you?" My shock is real. Fi keeps secrets better than anyone save me.

"There is little in my household that I don't know, Mistress." He coolly informs me.

"Well, I hope they put you on the case to find out who attacked us." Taking another sip of the coffee, I let the unexpected sweetness flow over my tongue. The staff knows how I take my coffee — full fat with cream and no sugar. Having enough of the brew, I put it back down just as the doctor emerges from the suite with the staff.

"Mistress?" Dr. Aaziz references me, but her gaze touches on Fariq's stoic form as well. As the other woman draws near, she crosses her arms over in her chest in a manner she's does often when giving us an update.

"She remembers nothing of the incident, but that is a trauma response we often see. Over the next few weeks and months, she may regain her memory or she may never recall them. It is paramount she is not pressed to remember anything. If her memories ever return, they should be organic. Her strength after this ordeal is as fragile as a child. She says she was never one to exercise fearing that she would get even skinner if she did, also doesn't she want to bulk up." Rolling her eyes in much the same way I did when Fi told me her reasoning in the past. "A smattering of yoga she informed me is all she does." The doubt in her gaze is almost laughable.

I smirk in response as Fariq huffs.

"Regardless, she will need to establish a routine to fully regain her health."

"I'll take care of that matter. As a member of my household, that responsibility falls to me." Schooling my expression at Fariq's declaration, I simply nod. I don't insist because though Hassan left the other day with us on good terms before he headed out

to an international conference, I don't want to chance what his reaction will be if he ever discover that it was Fi and not working with Prosper.

Dr. Bint Aaziz drones on more about diet and exercise, promising to send written instructions to Fariq's household.

She turns back to me when Fariq excuses himself to go check on Fi, his expression fraught with worry. "As for the other girl."

"Indigo," I supply.

"Yes, Miss Indigo." She steps closer and my tummy twists tightly at the graveness darkening her stern features.

"As you know, she suffered a bisymmetrical laceration on her face."

"Yes?" I raise my brows as I've been by both lady's side since the attack. She's kinda acting like I've neglected Indigo — whose name she couldn't even seem to say. Carry on, ma'am. I think to myself. She can think what she likes. Maybe she's in the category of people who think I only volunteered to help the earthquake survivors for publicity. Which is being splashed all over the tabloids now that I've not been allowed to return. Despite the statement put out to the press by Hassan's staff saying the prince had literally forbidden me from any more activities until the culprits are captured the speculation still runs amok.

I have major opps in this fucking palace that's becoming more and more obvious. When he returns, I'm thinking of asking him to take us with him when he goes back to Marrakesh.

"Ahem," the doctor clears her throat and even tugs on her collar. "Well, this is highly improper because you are not her relative, but since she was acting a member of your

household in her role and primary translator?—”

Ah, now I get it. He’s concerned with violating her privacy.

“It’s okay, Dr. Bint Aaziz, mum’s the word.” I press my forefinger to my lips, showing I’ll keep her secret.

She beams. “Ah, well. Miss Indigo has stated that she does not want her beauty restored. She’s refusing to go forward with any preparations to ready her skin for reconstruction. Claims her beauty has been a burden her entire life. She actually smiled when she saw herself for the first time after the bandages were removed.” The shock and horror she feels is conveyed in her expression. Taking a handkerchief out of her pocket, she dabs his forehead.

“It’s her decision, of course.” She quickly adds. “It’s just that His Royal Highness charged me with the young women’s care. This is would be a grave disappointment and failure.” Her eyes are imploring. She doesn’t want to displease Hassan. Doesn’t want the prince’s wrath to fall on her.

Am I the only person not scared of this man?

“I’ll talk to Indigo. If she still stands by her decision. I will let His Royal Highness know it is solely her decisions and that we both tried to convince her otherwise.”

Mollified, she nods then takes her leave.

Turning, I push open the door to the suite, covering my mouth when I see Fariq and Fi locked in a passionate kiss. Slowly backing out, I give them their privacy.

“So that’s the story,” Indigo tells me with way more cheerfulness than I would have after experiencing such a deep betrayal, and from her sister, no less.

“She needs help.” I say, clasping both her hands in mine.

“She does and she will, but I’m not going to be the one to save her this time. I’ve only enabled her. This one Thorne will have to figure out for herself. I used what little connections I had to secure my embassy position here with the help of my Love cousins, and I’m going to take full advantage of it.” She promises me.

“I really want you to think about your decision to not have your face attended to — but” I stop to add when she takes on a mutinous expression. The stitches covering the slash closing her still pretty face stretches from her temple, bisecting her right cheek, then beneath her nose to the lower half of her left cheek, and neck. “What ever you decide I support. I just want you to know the prince, and I have the best plastic surgeons in the world at your disposal.”

“I’m lucky to be alive,” she says in an upbeat tone. Then she squares me with a discerning stare. “If you’re uncomfortable with the way I look now, I understand.”

“Girl please,” I wave her words away and she giggles a little, but stop when her wound pulls. “I just don’t want you making rash decisions based on money or

emotion.”

“I’m not. Promise.” Her smile remains steady but more importantly the determination in her eyes lets me know more than anything she means what she’s saying.

“Well, alright—” My words cut off in a gasp when I feel a stabbing pain in my pelvis. I feel a gush of wetness like when you stand up during the first days of your period.

Panic ripples through me.

“I-I’ll come and check on you later.” I manage seeing a small frown pucker on her face, but I don’t have time to reassure her as I make my way out of the room.

I feel the blood running down my legs as I hobble down the corridor from the guests suites to my own. By the time I cross the threshold, pain has me nearly doubled over and a blood trail follows me.

By the time I get to our bathroom, I’m dizzy and damn near crawling.

Collapsing on the cool tiles of the bathroom, I breathe a sigh of relief, pressing my burning skin against the marble.

I barely hear the alarm in the attendant’s voice when she calls out to me as darkness descends.

Chapter Eighteen

THE VOW

HASSAN

Umm: Lyric has fallen ill. You need to return home immediately.

Stepping into the suite of rooms we share or would share if kingdom business hadn't been constantly keeping me away, I immediately notice the smell of cleanser mix with antiseptic, and the copper scent of blood.

Striding over to the door left ajar, I'm greeted by Umm and Fi sitting at my wife's bedside. Both look drawn and tired, though Fi's features look more haggard due to her recent ordeal. I can barely see Lyric's small form beneath the covers. The lights have been dimmed; I assume, to allow her rest. Yet, the monitor beeping at the bedside and the IV lines trailing from her body lets me know just how serious whatever happened is.

Heart slamming in my chest, I take it all in. Noting the attendants silent, yet at the ready, should anyone need them.

This room is like they are keeping a vigil? What the hell happened here?

I want to scream it, but I know deep down the assailant is watching. We haven't been able to make any connections to Asif. Fear creeps along my spine knowing that the coward is near. Watching every move of my family and the moment I left they struck.

Guilt slices through me no different than a scimitar. I allowed first my anger then the distraction of my work allow my family to be targeted.

The need for answers pushes me to face the women who were here to do what I did not.

"Umm?" Going over to her side I greet her kissing both cheeks. She looks up at me her eyes wet with unshed tears.

“Leave us.” She says in a firm yet still kind tone to the three nurses I didn’t notice when I entered who are standing like sentinels in the far corner of the room. The attendants following behind them all giving little bows.

I knew from her brief message that it was grave but looking at Lyric now she seems to be barely hangin on.

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“What happened?” I look from her to Fi for answers.

Taking my hand she pulls me to sit beside her in one of the chairs they’ve placed beside the bed to keep vigil. “She was poisoned. Poisoned in a way to make it look like a miscarriage — or an abortion.” She nods towards Lyric.

“Only the assassin didn’t count on her sharing the coffee with Fariq. They both fell ill around the same time. Only because he doesn’t have a uterus the cramps he suffered didn’t lead to massive hemorrhaging though he’s still in discomfort.” Her words are precise but I know she doesn’t want word to spread among the staff about Lyric’s condition.

“A complete man baby.” Fi pipes in from her seat on the other side of the bed.

Trying to process the news and unable to touch her, really see her, I step closer to the bed.

Her cheeks are sallow. The beautiful dark brown of her skin is ashen. Her lips are glossy though and her hair has been braided down each side and tied off at the ends with silk ribbons. I look over at Fi then.

“We made promises.” She quips to which I nod. Lyric told me about the promises they made to each other when I watched her grooming and changing Fi’s nail polish when she was in a coma.

Touching Lyric’s brow to smooth back an errant curl, I wrench my hand back. “She’s burning up.” My tone is almost accusatory towards my mother. Surely she should not

be this hot.

“The doctors said it’s her body fighting off the toxins.” She casts a worried gaze over to Fi — one I don’t miss.

“What?” Looking between them I try to tamp down the dread beginning to spiral as it twists my soul. All I know in that moment is I don’t want to lose her. I can’t fathom not coming home to her and Ayaan.

“She was a couple months along. Too early to tell Dr. Bint Aaziz says.” I swing around to face Fi who looks gutted. “There was a lot of bleeding. We almost lost her.” She continues in a rush to get it all out. “She fought like hell, for Ayaan — for you.” She nods emphatically like she believes that.

My heart feels like it’s been vivisected and had acid poured into an empty space. A miscarriage? It must have been from our wedding night.

“They are giving her lots of medicine to help her fight the infection from the miscarriage. She was in a lot of pain, but she’s made it through the worse part.” Umm, quietly reassures me the there is a heavy pause. “They don’t know much damage all this has caused, son, or how it will affect her ability to conceive or carry another child in the future.” She says with a heart breaking gentleness, knowing how much legacy and heirs mean to menlike me. Or should I say meant because the only thing I care about is her waking up.

I don’t voice those words, though. instead I ask, “How am I to care for her?”

“Baba,”my son calls to me from where is playing. His little arms wave for me to join him.

“I’m coming. I have to take care of mommy’s hair first.” Making the last twist on her

hair like Fi showed me then tying it off with a silk ribbon, but not too tight to not cause damage.

“Mommy sick?” He asks in a small, frightened little voice, his eyes round with worry.

“Yes, she is still sick.” The words almost choke me seeing how he plaintively asks for her. Something tells me this would be every day should I ever purposely keep him from his mother.

Eventually, the love and trust would turn to loathing if, when he found out, I kept them apart. Our family would be irrevocably broken and all the fault would lie at my feet.

Moving to the other side, I take her hair down, brush then plait her heavy thick curls, then again tie off the curled end of her hair with a silk ribbon. I lean over, placing a kiss on her now cool forehead. Her fever broke the day after I returned. Now three days later we still wait for her to wake up. The doctor assured us her body just needed to rest from working so hard. It was initially thought she’d have to undergo dialysis to remove all the poison from her system, but she’s proven far stronger than her small frame indicates.

“Her color is better.” Fi assured me it was not just hopeful thinking on my part when she and Fariq came to check on her earlier in this morning.

Watching over her these last few days has been an honor. My heart feels like it’s sitting outside my chest — open and vulnerable to the point I watch every breath she takes, hoping she wakes fearing she won’t.

I can admit, if only to myself, I don’t know how to do this alone and not only that I don’t want to. I need Lyric here with her soft lullabies, reading African American

Folktales with me to our son.

“Baba!” Ayaan’s cheerful smile welcomes me as I sit with my legs crisscrossed beside him on the floor. Today it’s cars and trains he wishes to play with. Each one has its own personality. He’s divided some into family groups. Some speaking English and other Arabic, I notice as he takes time explaining who is who.

We lose ourselves in our play until he demands more than asks to play horsey.

He’s chiming, “Giddy-up, giddy-up,” when I hear a faint giggle.

“You better not let any of your people see you doing that, not very princely.” Comes a scratchy voice from the shadowed recess of the bed that has both of us freezing mid-play.

Easing Ayaan’s excited little body off my back, I stand, pulling him up to my chest so that his feet are dangling and kicking excitedly as he switches between, “Umm and Mommy,” squiggling to get to her.

Carrying him over to where Lyric is sitting upright watching us, my heart trips over itself seeing her finally awake. It nearly breaks seeing how small and fragile she is in our bed. A bed I haven’t shared with her for most of our marriage either by choice — forcing myself to stay away or by the tragedy that struck, requiring me to be away for long hours. Pushing the regret down, I try to focus on the fact that she is back with us now — alive.

Her gaze is steady on us as we sit beside her on the bed. Silently, she reaches for Ayaan.

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I sit his solid little form in the crook of her arm. At least this side doesn't have the IV lines covering it.

"Mommy, Umm," Ayaan's voice is so mournful it shreds me. All his worry bubbles over as he lunges to into Lyric's chest to hug and hold her close.

"Umm," he cries into her neck.

"It's okay, handsome. Mommy is okay now. I was just tired." Burying her head into his little neck, she tries and fails to not weep. Her small shoulders shaking as she sobs.

I find my own eyes stinging from the emotions threatening to cleave me in two.

Brown wounded eyes look up at that moment and whatever she sees there has her reaching out to me.

My world caves and rebuilds itself in that moment.

Moving over to cover them both, making sure I neither crush nor cause her more pain, I wrap my arms around my little family. I don't stop the tears when they come knowing in them I have found my safe place.

We hold each other. Amazingly Ayaan doesn't squirm, he just lets his mom and me hold him. The tears from my wife subside and he looks up into her face, little tracks that have long since dried up speckling his cheeks.

A smile blossoms. “Bear Hunt, mommy?”

Softly my sparrow starts her song.

“This is so good.” Lyric hums around a fragrant spoonful of oats drizzled with honey. I’m reminded of our first meal together. How I was incandescent with rage but still couldn’t take my eyes off them — her.

“It’s porridge.” I deadpan all but rolling my eyes yet still unable to stop the smile nor the happiness at seeing her devour the small amount of food the doctor cleared her to eat.

“Maybe the best porridge in the world. We call it oatmeal, but it’s still better. Maybe it’s the honey.” She licks the spoon and my thoughts border on indecent, watching her tongue slide over the spoon.

Dragging my gaze away, I look at our son, now sprawled on the other side of the bed, now all the medical devices have been removed.

“I should put him in his own bed.” She stops me with a touch to my arm as I reach over to gather him in my arms.

“Let him stay with us just tonight.” Her eyes are pleading and still hold bruises beneath them.

“Of course, he can stay,” I murmur, my heart doing double-time when she lights up with a smile. Getting up I adjust the pillows around him so a boundary is erected to prevent him from rolling out the bed or crashing into Lyric, who though she’s eating and smiling still has a ways to go before she can take on a twenty-five pound toddler.

“Good idea. He’s always in a different position from where we put him to bed when I

go check on him during the night.” Her soft chuckle is a balm to my soul.

“He’s a little acrobat.” I agree, moving back to the opposite side hesitating. She’d said, “Stay with us.” but I’ve not been sharing her bed since I’ve had to split my time between here and Marrakesh.

“Will you stay, Hassan?” Her vulnerability guts me. Her bravery in meeting my gaze with an unwavering honesty fucking slays me.

I nod because she’s robbed me of words. I feel humbled and blessed all at once.

Settling beside her on the bed I rest my back against the headboard, drawing her into my arms. Burying my face into her curls, I breathe in the fragrance that is unique to her. My eyes burn, my vision blurs.

I vow. “I will find who did this to you and I will flay them alive.”

She shudders and though I don’t regret my words, I hate I’ve uttered them aloud and caused her upset.

“Dr. Bint Aaziz said they made me miscarry.” Pulling her closer, I press a kiss into her curls. She said as much to me, but my focus was on Lyric. If she’d ingested any more of that tainted coffee, she wouldn’t be here.

“You’re alive. That’s all that matters.” My words sound gruff and she shudders again. I feel the hot tears scalding my chest as she weeps for the child taken from us.

Hatred burns hot in my chest. I want to roar with the anguish that engulfs me. Stroking her back, I let her pour out her grief quietly.

I hold her until she quiets. Brushing her hair back, I look into her luminous eyes.

“I hate to say it. I really do, but I want you to get them, Hassan. They killed our baby. I want them to suffer.” I let her solemn words wrap around me.

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“I will see it done,” I promise.

Knowing I will die before I break this vow to her, I hold her. She and our son are my purpose. Avenging her will bring me unmitigated pleasure.

Chapter Nineteen

ESTABLISHING DOMINANCE

LYRIC ~ WEEKS LATER

“I want them to come visit here.” I tell Hassan over FaceTime. He still has not allowed me to go back to volunteer with the earthquake survivors, but he can give me this. “Imagine how wonderful it would be for the kids to have a play date at the palace. It can be like a carnival. They can see the grounds and have a brief break from everything they’ve been through — a day of celebration.” Worrying my lip, I wait for his reply.

He’s super grumpy since he’s been called away for more kingdom business this last week. Up till then, he’s been working from his home office, spending every moment with Ayaan and me.

“We’ll speak on it further when I return tonight.” He says but looks away, preoccupied by something one of his aides has given him. But I can’t stop the smile from spreading over my face.

“You’re be home tonight?” I try not to sound too breathless or smile too big, but I

can't deny the feeling of happiness filling in my heart. This week without him has been hard. Ayaan has been more than a handful, not used to Hassan being away since the last attack. To think the palace has become our home despite how we came to be here is remarkable. I try not to think of it as me folding or having Stockholm Syndrome — though it's probably a bit of both; but that I'm doing what's best for Ayaan.

“Yes, Jameela.” He murmurs, his eyes settling on me again. They hold an intensity that has my tummy doing somersaults. I know the question in his eyes. Asking it while others are around would be indiscreet.

Did I get the okay from Dr. Bint Aaziz?

Nodding at the unasked question in his eyes, I watch a small smile lift the corner of his cruel mouth in response.

“I'll see you then, husband.” I can't help the anticipation softening my voice. I'm always soft for him now. He's shown me so much he can be that place of safety for me.

“Tonight, little sparrow.” And then his austere public face is gone. And ohmygoodness! I feel like I haven't in so long a very long time. Way back to my teen years when I felt the first blush of love with Justice. To be honest, this is not the first time. The morning after I made love to Hassan was the first time.

That's why I was so crushed after finding out he was engaged. The previous night, he gave me something special. He saw me. Not the Empress. Not Lyric the diva or most every winner of the Grammys at thirty-five awards. The feeling of giddy excitement and newness when I woke, and he sat there nude, reading that script, made me feel so at home and safe. And despite not having discovered the person behind the attacks, I still feel safe with him.

“Ooowee, you look like you’re in love,” coos Fifi from where she is lounging on one of sofas. “Don’t she look in love, Indy?” she asks to the girl we’ve brought into our little coven and nicknamed who’s reading on her tablet across from her.

“Umhm,” comes the answer though Indigo never looks up so engrossed in her book to which I lob a pillow over to her. She dodges and screws me a mean look before returning to the device.

“Don’t agree with this messy, hoe. She’s a bad influence.” Wagging my finger, I walk back over to them from the plush little seating area, I moved to for a modicum of privacy while I spoke to Hassan. Not that they’d breathe a word of my conversation.

“Well, love or nor y’all gone be hunching now that Dr. Aaziz gave you the go ahead. Now you can get some head.” Fi makes a moue at me.

“See? Messy.” Sitting across her, I fold my legs under me.

“I’m happy she said I didn’t have any scaring or damage though.” Hassan had more than indicated that he didn’t care as long as I was okay, but hearing those words today made me so happy. More so because I never wanted my choices taken from me ever again. No one had the right to take away my rights or my life for that matter. I would fight for myself every time and I’m so glad my body was resilient enough that I survived what they tried to do to me.

“I’m so happy for you.” Indy looks up from the tablet unburdened this time, the slashing scar doing nothing to diminish her beauty.

“Same.” Reaching over to squeeze my knee in support, she gives me a jaunty little wink.

“Mistress.” My head pops up, attention drawn to one of the palace officials standing just inside the threshold of the outer chamber.

The woman boasts a full up sweep of gray hair styled in a severe but immaculate bun.

My tummy sours as she gives me a thin smile.

“Do you have an appointment?” On cue, Fi stands falling back into the assistant role she held for years, blocking the woman’s path.

“Her Majesty said I could bypass protocol just this once, since my messages have gone unanswered. She’s sure there has been some miscommunication with the High Consort’s staff.” The woman whom, I’m pretty sure, is the head of my son’s primary school education team.

“Let, Mistress?” I pause for the woman to answer

“Umar.” She supplies screwing a dismissive look Fi’s way.

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“Let Mistress Umar pass,” I say, ready for the nuisance to be over.

“High Consort,” she says sternly, looking down at me with disapproval. Presently I resemble an odalisque of old, but I will not let this schoolmarm think she can be disrespectful.

“Please have a seat, Mistress Umar, while I have refreshments sent in. Ladies, if you will excuse us.” I nod to Fi and Indigo, reminding the new arrival that her breach of protocol does not extend to airing my business in front of others any more than she has.

“How may I help you, Mistress Umar?” I ask as I pour her tea with practiced expertise.

Ignoring my hospitality, she clasps her hands leaning forward, eyes hard with anger.

“High Consort,” oh how she stresses that word, I muse, nodding for her to continue.

“As you well know, as presented by the schedule that was given to you upon your arrival at the palace, the prince’s primary studies should have already started. We allowed more time because of the unfortunate accident that befell you. However, we must now begin his lessons in deportment and Arabic.”

I let silence fall between us as I have in the many music industry meetings where I’ve had to advocate for myself.

I’m literally internally battling myself not to lash out at this woman who is clearly

passionate about her job, which is to see my son educated properly as a prince so he can one day take the mantle from his father.

That is what I tell myself. Again and again, I remind myself that this lady is just doing her job. Don't take it personal. Still.

"We won't be doing that. At least right now." I say after a small eon. One I use to talk myself out of cussing this heffa out. I am the High Consort, not some alley whore like my mom used to call the girls who fought in the street. I am not just the prince's consort, but his wife and I will be respected at such.

I can see her tuning up to clap back.

"You'll have to forgive me. I'm very new to all this." Waving a negligent hand to the room at large I take the opportunity to grab my tea. "I don't feel comfortable putting this much stress on my son. He's barely had his first birthday. We will revisit this when he's a little older."

Pulling herself so rigid she resembles the Sphinx, Mistress Umar allows the disdain she feels for me flood her face. "His Royal Highness and his brother, Prince Sadiq were in class full time when they were only a little older."

Her words snag my interests. "Well, if they were older, then I'm sure Ayaan can wait a little longer. My husband said the king took on the majority of their learning until they formally began school —"

"Yes," Bristling she's quick to add after another dismissive sweep of her gaze, "The princes' did not have any other undue influence."

A smug little smile tugs at my lips. "And what is the undue influence you're referring to, Mistress?"

She harrumphs as if further aggrieved about having to spell it out. “You being a foreigner, an American, unable to speak our language. You must admit that your culture, or rather lack of it, is a hindrance to the young prince. The sooner he’s removed from that influence, the better.”

When I say it takes everything not to jump up and molly whop her ass...

“I’m surprised as an educator you’d be so ignorant, Mistress. Black American culture is rich. Many North Africans come to live in America, assimilate with Black Americans and are the better for it. When His Highness and his brother came to the US, they met and befriended my friend, FADE. That relationship proved to be the best thing they ever could have done. Many times they came to Sunday dinner with FADE’s family. Black Americans have given not only much to my country but to the world. We have strong families despite the challenges of the past. We thrive.” I’m proud I managed to keep my tone level. “Now, I will have some reading material sent to you and I encourage you and the rest of your staff to do an immersive study on Black American History and culture before you come to me again about educating my son.” Standing I wait for her to rise.

Face flushed with anger, she rises, our height difference clear. “High Consort, I mean no offense?—”

“None was taken. Your concern is noted and I’ll pass it on to my husband.” Waving her away, and ignoring the look of horror etched across her face, I move to the entrance giving her no choice but to follow.

I barely acknowledge her bow before turning back to friends reemerging from the garden I banished them to for this bullshit.

“These stuck-up bitches, I swear,” Fifi grouches as she takes the couch opposite me.

“You were magnificent.” Indigo grabs the tablet she’s left. “You were so classy and never raised your voice while you told her off.”

“Regal even,” Fi agrees with a wink. Not adding much to my relief that I wasn’t given that honor. I guess we are both acclimating to our new environment. Though I’m not so sure that is for the best.

As much as the last few weeks have brought peace, none of it seems real. It is as if I’m playing a part I wasn’t the first choice for. I’m the last minute replacement for the act that got stuck in a storm and I don’t like that. I’ve been the star too long to be made to feel like I don’t have star billing.

The fact remains. This is Khadijah’s spot. This room is the palette she designed. When the staff came to me asking if I wanted to change it soon after we arrived, I said no because at the time I doubted we’d be here long. Now, I can’t help but see how she imagined welcoming Hassan home after he’d had meetings all day concerning the kingdom.

Would he find it soothing when she welcomed him home? Or would he be removed and surly like he is sometimes with me?

It’s silly to compare. No one is Lyric, the Empress. Still, would he rather a butterfly than the sparrow he calls me?

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“Well, I’m sure there’s going to be some backlash.” Shrugging with nonchalantness that I don’t feel, I take my seat again, curling my feet under me.

“You have to lean into the power you have here. The prince gives you that,” Fi says. “You’re his mom. Everyone else falls back on that power alone. You just have to claim it. How do you think the consorts of old ran these places?”

“I see you’ve been doing some light reading?” Indy says, scrolling her device. I almost miss when she darts a look at me, then hurries to scroll away.

“What’s that Indy?” I ask, reaching for her iPad.

“Some mess.” She grumbles as I take it from her hand.

“Hmph.” Looking down, I see a pic taken of him laughing with Princess Amani, Khadijah, and some other socialites.

At first I think it’s from the past until I read the caption:

Crown Prince Hassan Al Rasheed with former fiancée, Khadijah Bin Saladin at the impromptu charity gala for the earthquake survivors, the heiress threw instead of the engagement party, the two were supposed to have the same day.

Many times I’ve I asked the Lord to give me confirmation about my place here. Never thought it would come as quick as it did after my pervious thoughts.

I’m being shown clearly this is not my place. Unintentionally as is it is, I’ve usurped

this girl's place and still she's doing more queenly things than me. I can't even go help the people because someone keeps trying to kill me. Part of me wants to blame her, but even after our brief meeting, I know it doesn't fit the vibe.

I don't miss the comments of the people wishing they were a couple, saying how cute they are or how she's the genuine princess; the one the people connect with.

"Messy as ever." Handing it back over to her, I try not to let it bother me, but I don't lie to myself or them.

"Ummy." My son's cheery voice mixing his two names for me catches me right before a depressive episode can emerge. All the adversity of the day melts away in his smile.

"I see you started without me." The heavy baritone has me looking up to the jade gaze of my husband. His mouth bracketed by stern lines. I can't help thinking that the more responsibility he takes on for the kingdom, the less he smiles.

"You've been doing quite a lot without me, too — husband." With cool deliberation, I roll my eyes at him, leaving them closed when I add, "Charity galas with your ex-fiancee, for example."

I've never been passive aggressive. I don't believe in letting things linger. Coming at your face when I attack. Never one to throw the rock and hide my hand. That's why I can't stand a cheater. Stand up in your shit — own it. Don't play in my face when you know things aren't what they need to be. Let me know so I can fix it or get the hell on.

I hear nothing for a solid ten ten seconds. At the sound of him shucking off his clothes, I peek. Goddamn. Did he get finer as I recuperated? I can't help the way my treacherous pussy clenches at the sight of his abs flexing with every movement. This

motherfucker, I swear.

My eyes widen fully when he steps into the swimming pool size bath with his dick swinging. It's long, thick and strong, rising from a nest of dark curls rising well past his navel. Sliding back against the wall seat as he approaches. I shake my head.

"Never." He growls. Stepping to me, pushing my thighs open.

"Wh—"

"Never question my loyalty, little sparrow." He notches his dick at my entrance. Gaze hard, jaw flexing, his stare drinks me in. "I'd never dishonor you."

I gasp as he pushes in. My body struggles to take him. His hard mouth, luscious lips already on mine, giving me time to adjust to his massiveness.

"Sparrow," he groans, pulling back from the tangle of our tongues as inch by delicious inch, my body accepts him.

"Don't hurt me," I plead.

He pauses, his gaze on me. "Never." His strokes are gentle, though we both know I'm talking about my heart and not his lovemaking.

"Hassan," I whimper as he surges inside me. It's been so long for us.

Lifting my bottom, he angles me to take him deeper.

"My good little sparrow, taking me to fucking well." Bottoming out, he holds me, fucking me so deep the water sloshes around us, adding to the colophony of sound surrounding us.

Arching, I do my best to meet every surging drive of his heavy dick.

“Fuck yeah, wife,” he praises his dick digging into every inch of me.

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“Yess, kill it, kill it.” Panting my own filthy little encouragement, I urge my husband to fuck me dirty.

“I got you.”

Screaming with frustration when he pulls out, I look at him, wild with fury.

“Shut your lil’ ass up, and turn around so I can beat that pussy up,” he shoves me away and around, putting my leg on the edge of the bath, leaving me open and vulnerable to his desire.

‘Ohmyfuckingga—’ I damn near scream when he rams his dick inside in a smooth glide. Eyes rolling, my words cut off when his hand manacles my neck as he fucks me like he’s demanding penance for all my for indiscretions. A penance I willingly give. Pinned down at this angle, I have to take everything he gives and I relish in giving his demands.

“I am yours. You are mine. You never have to worry about me, songbird.” Pressing deep, he dips. The roughness of his jaw brushing against my neck making me shiver. My pussy clenches, slicking his dick with essence. This motherfucker feels divine.

“Hassan,” I pant.

“What you need, lil’ mama?” Shifting, he fucks me in hard deep strokes, makes me take him, all of him. “I think, I know. You need this motherfucker right here, huh, sparrow?” Withdrawing, he plunges back so hard I bite my lip. “Then take it then. Take it like a wife should.”

He pounds my pussy with relentlessly. Making my toes curl with every stroke.

The hand on my throat tightens. “Come on me, Lyric. I want to feel the way you let me ruin you before I give you my baby,” he growls. Hips thrusting, he fucks and fucks and fucks, not letting me resist the surge of his hips.

I’m trapped in his gaze as my pussy spasms at his command. My essence making my destruction simple work as he slams home again, again. The only tell that he’s breaking right along with me is the way his jaw hardens as he floods my pussy.

“That’s it.” Shuddering, he leans in, sumptuous lips taking mine in a lazy drag.

He holds me there for long minute.

“We good?” He grumbles after a while. I nod.

“Nah, I don’t think so.” Pulling free he scoops me free, taking me to our bed.

Chapter Twenty

CALAMITY

LYRIC ~ A COUPLE MONTHS LATER

“It’s a full house.” Fifi squeals as we look out at the masses assembled in at the Hassan II, soccer stadium, but that’s not what they call it. “Here it’s football,” Hassan coolly informed me when he suggested that I do a benefit concert for the earthquake victims. The naming of the stadium in his honor had been a gift from his father on his return to take his place as heir to the throne.

I hate to say it, I really do. I was more than a little jealous when I found out Khadijah

had a gala for the victims of the earthquake.

“You were recovering from the attack.” Hassan told me early the next morning as we breakfasted in bed after he made love to me all night, repeatedly driving the point home he was only focused on me and our family.

He then suggested that I do what I do best and have a concert for the people. I thought was a wonderful idea. We could’ve done it sooner, but I wanted to platform Moroccan artists. I still smile, thinking of the day the calls went out. Each of them was delighted to be showcased on the worldwide telecast. Humbled to be included in helping their fellow countrymen.

Hassan made it so that it could be telecast worldwide with Black Rock handling the concert to settle the lawsuit that I didn’t even know he knew about. Terrence it turned out only wanted to hear from me. He’d taken an enormous loss in the canceling of my tour. Hassan took care of everything with the help of FADE while I was sick financially, then when I recovered, he gave Black Rock the exclusive rights to the concert.

Looking out among to the crowd, I have to say they did a magnificent job. The venue looks like stars are falling all around with the stage set up like an imperial palace. The stadium is filled to capacity. Everyone who’s here has donated at least a minimum bid of one- hundred-fifty dollars to the earthquake survivors’s benefit fund set up by the Hassan with Black Rock receiving ten percent — half of what they normally commission after Hassan’s marathon negotiations with Terrance. Rumors spread this is my final concert and the bids skyrocketed. We exceed our goal raising over ten million for the event. I insisted on my original tour crew so they could be compensated for me having to cancel yet another tour. Hassan had already made them whole financially when he took me off the plane, so except for a couple who’d already taken new gigs everyone has happy to come help me with this concert.

I've still have not said anything publicly about my plans to retire, but I think tonight would be appropriate since I will have the eyes of the world watching me.

"We start with Sassafras," Fifi needlessly reminds me. I've started every concert with that song since I began singing. Justice wrote it for me when we were sixteen. It went viral on YouTube. People fell in love with that song and our story. It started my career. I'd sing it at county fairs. Then I sang it opening for FADE and Ghad. Now it gets millions of plays on music apps and that money goes to his parents. It's the least I could do for all their son gave me.

"Following with Baddie, your top singles, then ending with My Love, Hibibi" she says so low so no one can overhear the song I've been working on and will sing with only my piano and my guitarist.

Her eyes are swimming when I look at her and it takes everything for me not to burst out crying. I hug my bestie. Fi knows, I love my husband probably knew before I did. Way before I even acknowledged it. Maybe it's because I feel like I have so much to lose or felt that way until my life was almost taken. I don't have time to be fucking around letting my pride dictate my actions. I need to take life with both hands just like my dad said in his letter all those years ago to my mom.

I won't let another day pass without letting him know how I feel. I know he was close to letting us be more before he thought I was trying to leave him. I won't ever betray Fi and I won't confess to a lie but can tell him this truth. I love him with my whole heart.

Looking up to the press box where I know he's looking on with Ayaan, I smile. This concert is the highlight of my career. My son and husband being able to so see my last public performance is the culmination of my career.

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Every press organization is present, and we did an event with them that just ended. I don't know if it's my status as the High Consort or because this event is for the people, but they were the most respectful, than they have ever been. None of the diva questions. And not even anything about me keeping my pregnancy secret then marrying him in a shotgun wedding. I know without him even saying, Hassan has been protecting me from all the negative publicity that could possibly emerge from an event like this. Unlike so many times before, my motives have not been questioned.

“She loves the people of Morocco and she wants to help.” The only word from His Royal Highness on record and that has stood strong for the press outlets throughout the world. Nothing more, nothing less.

Never in my life has anyone ever stood ten toes down for me like this man. FADE has stood by my side, but Hassan stood in front — chest out. Taking all the slings and arrows that should have come my way unblinkingly.

I've seen proud Black men stand up for their wives many times, yet never have I ever thought a man would put himself at the front for me.

How could I not make a song like My Love Habib for him?

Fi cried when I sang it for her the first time and that was enough for me to know that I should sing it for the world tonight.

“You got this! You see how they love you? The top prices was ten thousand. Somebody paid ten-K to see you, Lyric!” Fi whisper-shouts as we me look on at the act performing before me.

I glance back, seeing Aliah, Indigo, and Fariq in my periphery. My team, loyal and true. All here for me. Whether through loyalty to me or Hassan, they are present.

“Yes, they love me and I love them.” I say with the reverence I feel that encompasses me with every performance. It’s never lost on me that everyone doesn’t get their dream to come true and I’m blessed to be able to do what I love.

As the other artist leaves I’m on their heels striding onstage swinging this forty-inch ice blond buss-down with a Farah Fawcett fringe bang I totally had her copy from my favorite BookTok influencer with the confidence and love first instilled in me by Justice then completed by Hassan. Two very different men that have shown me love in their distinct ways.

Justice was light and Hassan — gray tinged with black. Still, no one who claimed to be light ever supported me like my husband.

This thought is my companion as I step center stage to the crowd of a hundred thousand.

When the explosion hits, it takes me by surprise. My husband covered every contingency. Covered all the gaps. How could this happen?

The stage shakes, shudders, then starts to crash as the foundation begins to crumble beneath our feet.

Flashes go off. I don’t know if it’s guns. Yeah, my mind goes back to living in the projects. Those are definitely gun shots.

A burning pain sears my arm. Bright crimson stains the rhinestone covered white sleeves of the couture jumpsuit Summer made me.

“Lyric,” I swivel, ungluing myself from the spot I’m standing in, trying not to be distracted by the people screaming and panicking. Another hard oscillation and the far right side of the stage crashes like the earth is opening up, but I know it’s not a quake.

“Lyric,” Fi screams again, “RUN.”

I don’t think. Heart pounding. I look toward the press box and seeing smoke pouring from it.

Ayaan. Hassan. The only thing pounding louder than my heart is my need to get to them. Running as fast as I can across the stage, I ignore the shattering of the bulbs. The acrid smell of smoke and sulfur threatens to overtake me. I hear the pinging bullets, and I know they are for me.

Somehow and I know it’s nothing but angels shielding me as I race to the dark corner where Fi is waving frantically with panic urging me to hurry.

Just as I reach her, she darts out to grab me.

“No,” Fariq shouts, rushing toward us. I don’t know what he sees, but Fi twists and her body jerks hard, pushing me forward and down under her.

The breath is knockout of me. Looking up through the smoke and a little dazed, I see Fariq unload his clip in the direction of the shots that took us down.

He reloads, then sweeps, taking out more assailants. Crouching, still shooting, somehow he’s able to get enough of our clothes and drag us out of the line of sight.

“Lyric, are you hurt?” He demands as he checks Fi’s pulse. I notice the trembling of his bloodied fingers. Fi’s not shot, she just took the brunt of the fall. I’m hoping it’s

just the wind knocked out of her.

“It’s nothing, just a graze.” Medics swarm in, taking Fi, who starts to move groggily.

Fariq helps me stand.

“Hassan messaged me to come immediately. Said he needed to get Ayaan to safety—” I stare at him, confused. This is not protocol. He seems just as bewildered.

“When I stepped away to call to verify, the explosion hit.”

“Sir, we have to take her. Now.” Then they a rushing Fi off. My security team is all in place surrounding me.

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“Go with her.” I urge him. The team has me separated. Indigo and Aliah are ushered in one direction and I in another. We split off as protocol dictates. I step into a black hoodie set they provide, making sure to tuck the wig in neatly.

The entire thing takes seconds. Invisible among the troop of warriors handpicked by my husband, I head out of the stadium.

We have a rendezvous spot where we will change cars five miles from the venue. I suspect that’s where Hassan and Ayaan will be waiting. I know he’s going crazy.

As we reach the cars, the cadre of men surrounding me all freeze then collapses to the ground.

Three black security vans pull up and a tall man fully swathed in black steps from the side door. I can only see his eyes. Eyes I know. Mercury silver eyes of a beautiful little boy I didn’t think lived anymore.

So when the voice whispers. “Hassan did this. Come with me or die.” I don’t question it. I take the hand offered.

Chapter Twenty-One

THE SEVEN

LYRIC ~WESTERN CAPE SOUTH AFRICA

I hear the men arguing again.

“Ummy?” Looking down at the sorrowful eyes of my son. I don’t know what to say. His worried voice is the same litany asking for his father since the day we arrived. His tantrums have been legend from the moment he realized that his daddy wasn’t coming with us.

Now, I know I know what Hassan would have faced if he kept me from our son. You are immediately the villain. The reasoning doesn’t matter. You’ve taken the person they love most in the world from them, and they resent you for it.

I know already know what he’s going to ask.

“Daddy?” Like clockwork. He’s reverted to mostly English, having stopped asking for Hassan in Arabic weeks ago.

“He’s not here, sweetie.” I say for what feels like the millionth time.

“Daddy?” His face scrunching up. His little lip poking out. The betrayal is clear. The men surrounding us. Supposedly protecting us. Are not his daddy. No matter how kind they are. Well, at least some of them. Ozymandias, DiDi’s cousin, is not at all the kind of man you allow around children. He is a stone-cold killer for what I’ve gleaned from the days I’ve been here. Not that his brother. The smoother yet just as deadly, Nikko with his molten, sliver eyes isn’t just as deadly if not more so.

“This is fucked up by all measure.” Oz hisses. “I got other shit on my agenda. I don’t have time to be babysitting for your ass, bro.”

“Man, fuck you and your little revenge. Trust. You got plenty of time to make El Patrón de la Muerta pay for fucking up your spot. We pay our debts. Always.” Comes the cold reply from the man I haven’t seen in two decades who now runs one of the most powerful criminal syndicates in the world, Nikko Savalle. He swooped in like a super hero the night of the attack at the concert, rescuing me and Ayaan, taking us to

safety.

The reports following has us presumed dead. The intel given to Nikko was this was Hassan's plan the entire time.

"Ummy?" Looking at my son's outreached hand, I force a smile, taking the block he holds out to me expectantly.

Taking the wooden cube, then another and another, I build the tower he insists on us making and has since we've been in Western Cape. I realized soon after getting here that it's the same replica of the place that he and his father built while I was convalescing after the poisoning.

The thought tore through me as I wondered why didn't he just let me pass away then? Why nurse me back only to kill me in such a spectacular fashion? Was it so that no questions would be asked if the attack occurred in public rather than in the palace, where the suspicion would fall closer to him and his family?

The days that have passed have not made the treachery easier to bear. Were it not for my son. I'd wouldn't be able to get out of bed. My heart is broken, yet for him I rise every day to face this new normal. My husband tried to kill me.

The news coverage saying we both perished is all over the global news. And there have been updates every day. Rob didn't miss one beat in playing the distraught dad and giving interviews. Hassan looks distraught from the few videos I've seen. Looking at him, you'd think that he's had his heart ripped out root and stem. But after having the evidence laid out before me by Nikko and Oz in such a matter of fact dispassionate way has allowed me to see his betrayal for what it is.

"There is a certain expertise my brothers and I have," Nikko coldly informed me the day after I arrived and demanded answers from him.

Nodding, I digested the information that the little boy my sister, Song, used to feed through a cut out in a window screen grew up to be a ruthless billionaire assassin. “I was contacted through a network we don’t use anymore but for the most extreme cases. The mark was you and the baby, the amount offered astronomical even for us — one hundred fifty million per soul. We had three hours to agree or it would move to another organization that is known for our same efficiency — The Tatsumoto Yakuza and they, like us, never miss. When I saw it was you. I took it, knowing it was the only way to keep my promise.”

“That was the promise of a baby.” I told him in a shaky voice.

“It was a promise, nonetheless.” He contended me with a shrug.

“I attempted to go through channels to discover who made the request. Originally, I wanted to reach out to your husband, but something told me to hold back because previous experience has taught us that these requests come from those closest to home. We were not surprised when we discovered the wire transfer originated from one of Hassan Al Rasheed accounts.”

Thinking about it now doesn’t make it easier. My chest feels like it’s been hacked apart with a rusty hammer. Blow after malicious blow to the dream I had for my little family.

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How could I be so simple to believe his lies? Hoping the dream could be any different really had me fucked up this time.

“Mommy?” Ayaan’s hopeful but still sad gaze draws my attention. So like his daddy, but innocent — guileless, no lies or betrayal.

“Yes, sweetie?” My heart twinges looking down, at the little family group he’s assembled.

“Babba, mommy, baby,” he smiles, a new tooth poking through. A new tooth, I promise myself Hassan will never see. I have to protect my son.

“We need to talk.” Trying to keep the exaggeration from my sigh, I nod to Nikko as he leads me into his brother’s office after I put Ayaan down for the night. He cried when I told him that daddy wasn’t there. I was feeling low, not knowing how I could make my son understand he would not see his daddy again.

One day, I was going to have to tell him the truth, and I dread that day with every fiber of my being.

The room is has a wall screen. There is a meeting in progress. Five blacked-out screens. The people silhouetted in the background. All men look massively jacked. The notorious Bastard Brother Syndicate. Two are present here with me — Nikko and Oz, the others they’ve not named. Nikko told me it’s better that I don’t know. The brothers prefer their anonymity. To know them is to die.

“I guess. I’m special.” I quipped to Nikko only to have Oz grumble, “You better

fucking believe it Empress and it ain't because of you being the biggest star in the world."

I knew immediately what it was and my tummy twisted at the thought. It had nothing to do with me at all and everything to do with my youngest sister, Song.

"What's up?" Raising my eyes to Nikko's tall form, I talk to him, knowing the other bastard brothers have never spoken when I was at their meetings.

"Lyric." My heart stops hearing FADE's voice as his face fills a screen. Ghad is beside him. Both of them wear masks of fury.

"Mistakes were made." Nikko quirks a brow. His voice cool and nonchalant, like he could be speaking of the exceptional weather here.

"Nig — man, fuck you." Oz surges from where he sits behind a massive desk. He slams his hands down hard on the mahogany surface. It's a replica of the resolute desk that once belong to the father they were happy to tell me they killed for all his heinous crimes against their mothers. That's what brought the seven together — that and taking down traffickers of women and children — the one heroic thing the criminal syndicate does.

A crescendo of voices in various languages rises from the screens. In my travels I've pick up several profanities. This conversation is definitely laden with them. There's no yelling, just chilling statements, sneering asides and mirthless chuckles.

"The fuck you mean — mistakes were made?" Oz seethes over the others. But his voice is never raised. His eyes speak murder and for his kinfolk, too. His eyes flick to me for a hard second. "Little lady, your husband is on his way with his folk and I don't mean the Gendarmerie, I'm talking about his special forces. My advice, don't run."

Stunned as he grabs a flack jacket and stalks toward me. He stops just short of me and cups my chin. “I really like, Sassafras. Stay alive so you can sing it again.” He gives me a wink. Then, with a heated look at Nikko that speaks of retribution, he leaves.

“Wh-what’s going on?” I can’t stop the stammer as I look wildly at the screens. Nikko and back again. “Hassan’s on his way?”

“Yes.” Nikkio says, rubbing his hand through his thick hair. “The account was a decoy. Ghad and Hisashi Takeda discovered the discrepancy. They also tracked the payment to us. FADE reached out to me as a courtesy to let me know of the discovery and the opp to recover you and Ayaan.”

“When will it start? There are innocent people here, FADE?” I look at the screen where he’s looking on.

“Why didn’t you reach out to me, Lyric?” he demands. Ghad says something I can’t hear shaking his head — probably telling his brother I’ve been through enough. The truth is Nikko didn’t want to give me a phone, thinking I’d reach out to Hassan demanding answers. “I’ve seen others fall for one of these guy’s lies and end up a year later with a toe tag. The same went for my family. No contact until her was sure I didn’t have Stockholm Syndrome.

“Right. It doesn’t matter. It’s imminent. No one will be spared and you won’t be either if you resist. Hassan is not fucking around.” He warns me, disappointment still evident in his manner and gaze.

“Can’t you call him? I’m just finding all this out. I didn’t know—” I stop when Ghad shakes his head.

“We already tried to talk to him, babe. You need to do whatever you have to in order to stay safe.” Ghad looks down at his phone, then hazel eyes lock on the two of us

standing there. “Nikko, you got about five minutes.”

I can feel the hesitation ripple through the man beside me, but I know Hassan will cut him down the moment he sees him. I have only one thought.

It seems our thoughts we are in accord. “How’s Song?” He asks for my ears only.

“I think you need to stay alive to find out for yourself.” I turn to him.

“Your debt is repaid.”

“Not by a long fucking shot.” He scoffs a little smile, softening the severe angles of his face.

“Then save Song. She’s not safe.” I demand.

The transformation is immediate. He jerks a nod, dipping his head to press a chaste kiss on my forehead. Then he’s gone.

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One by one the screens flick off, leaving only FADE and Ghad looking at me with worry marking their faces.

“Lyric—” FADE starts.

“I got this.” I assure them with a confidence I don’t feel.

“You sure about that?” Ghad demands. It’s then I realize he’s made contingencies and by the look FADE shoots him, he’s just realizing it too.

I nod. “He’s my husband. I love him.”

“Fuck.” I hear them both swear as I head out to the front of the house to meet my husband.

The anticipationdamn near cripples me as I wait for Hassan. Tummy tight with anticipation I go through the front room entrance of Oz’s palatial living room, turning on all the lights.

I wish I’d changed out of the frilly gown and matching wrap, miffed that Nikko didn’t give me heads up about what was going down before I went in to hear this news.

Joggers and a fleece would have been better even in the South African heat.

Hearing a fleet of vehicles converging on the compound, I move to the entrance. There’s no point in having them kick down Oz’s doors and tear apart his home so

soon after the man just had it renovated.

Briefly I wonder if Ayaan will wake from the noise.

Opening the door just as the black tactical vehicle pulls to a stop at the bottom of the drive, I step out the door.

Wrapping my arms around myself, I try to quell the shivers racking my body that have nothing to do with the warmth of the night.

What if they are wrong? I know Ghad is a genius hacker. I've heard about Hisashi Takeda. But what if Nikko's intel was right? But FADE would kill Hassan's entire family if he harmed me. Ghad, though, the quieter of the two brothers is even more deadly.

A dark figure clad from head to boot in black emerges, slamming the door behind him. My heart seizes seeing his tall frame silhouetted against the night sky. Seeing me, he pauses for a second, raising his fist high in 'hold' sign before he starts towards me, his strides eating up the distance.

He's coming so fast I start backing up. I reverse into the entrance when he finally stops, his boots touching my bare toes.

Gauntleted hands reach up, ripping the mask free of his face. A thin, still healing scar is etched across high on his jaw.

"My son?" he grits. Gaze fierce, he rakes me with barely held rage.

I almost stumble, backing away, righting myself as I pivot, just in time to save me from crashing into the marble floor. Steadying myself, I inhale, trying to calm myself.

Leading him up a flight, then another of stairs to the guest wing of the house, I try to ignore the heat lasered on my back like bullseye.

Standing at the door of my son's temporary room, I take a moment to catch my breath. Twisting the knob slowly, I ease the door open with Hassan's presence at my back.

The heat of his body brushes past me as he strides over to the baby bed Oz had set up for Ayaan before we arrived. He'd been waiting playing action figures with Ayaan when I arrived. The picture was of pure doting uncle.

One could almost forget he's a remorseless killer. It had been his job to retrieve my baby while Nikko came to rescue me. My childhood friend rightfully knew I wouldn't question him if he came and got me.

"All this is left over from when my cousin Easy came to visit." He shrugged when he showed me to the room. Only I knew it wasn't just any visit. She ran away from her biker husband, Angel, for nearly a year. He attacked this compound to get her and their son, Judah, back.

Watching Hassan, as he stands over our son for a long moment, staring down at the mop of curly hair, my heart feels heavy with deep empathy. The pain etched on his face breaks my heart.

His shoulders rise, then fall heavily, as with what I assume is relief. Pulling off one of his gauntlets, he reaches down, touching Ayaan's curls.

Shooting me a hard look, his mouth hardens. "Where's the motherfucker who took him and did this to my face?"

"He left not long before you came." I tell him.

He looks at me for a long uncomfortable moment, his face a mask of icy stoicism, before turning back to gaze down at Ayaan.

Finally he brushes a kiss on his forehead, closing his eyes with reverence.

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Stiffening when he moves toward me, I will myself to move, to run, though I know there is nowhere I can go.

I shouldn't further antagonize him — I know that still as my feet dart away and down the hall before I can even think of anything else to do. I have no plan, but fear is a huge motivation.

A rough, cruel chuckle grits out of him as his stride eats a way too easy pace behind me.

“Where do you think to go, wife? Every exit is covered.” He doesn't even raise his voice. He doesn't break stride. Not when I take the stairs.

Heading far away from my son, I rush out to the vast lush grasses of the property.

Maybe I just don't want him to kill me in front of my son. Maybe I hope he'll see reason.

Realization hits that I'm innocent in all this, that I'm only making it worse. He knows I had no choice but to go. I'm sure FADE told him my side.

Pulling up short right before the property line gives way to the endangered animal sanctuary that Oz keeps, I feel a stitch in my side.

Turning, I face him.

“Oh no, keep running,” he growls, shaking his head slowly. His stride is slow and

leisurely, like a predator talking his prey. He licks his lips, nodding for me to keep going.

“Uh-uh,” stumbling a little, I keep backing up. Taking a quick look behind me, then back to him, I hold my hands up. My fingers are trembling. Squeezing them doesn’t help, but I keep them up to maintain some semblance of distance, but he just keeps coming.

“Animals roam freely in the sanctuary.” I add, backing up to a mural tree.

Eyes narrowing, his mouth thins. “Animals roam free all over this property. But I guess you were too busy entertaining other men to take note.”

Keeping my hand raised to ward him off. “I mean the big ones.” Clarifying, ignoring his insinuation.

He knocks my hand away. “I’m the deadliest motherfucker out here. The only thing you have to worry about is me, little sparrow.”

“I didn’t know what was going on until tonight. Nikko said mistakes were made?—”

He leans into me, thrusting his face close to me, snarling through clenched teeth, “How the fuck are you involved with the Savalle Syndicate? Why would they break our alliance for you, Lyric?”

His eyes sweep over me. A sick feeling settles in my stomach. He’s already thinking the worse but there are some secrets I can’t speak on even to him — especially when they aren’t my own.

“All I can say is I grew up with Nikko. He was our neighbor in Elyton Village.”

His jaw works hard. “FADE said as much but said y’all thought he was dead. So was it Oz? Did he make you fuck him for protection?”

“No, no, no! Why would you even say something like that?” My throat is raw from running from him and the pain from his awful assumptions.

“Because men like them don’t just do shit like this. They only care about their seven. No women. But I’ve seen what women like you can do. How you can twist a motherfucker in knots. And none is better at it than you, Empress. Had me trusting that you’d keep your word.” Bitter hard words spew from him like poisoned daggers straight into my heart.

Fury has me pushing hard at his chest. “Well, I don’t have to fuck anyone to get them to do shit for me, asshole. A-and I kept my word. I was told you were behind the attack.”

His hand shoots out against my chest. Something dark twist on his face. My back slams into the bark of the tree. Wincing, I grab his arms, holding me away from him.

I’m the one that was attacked. Me. Now I’m having to defend my integrity. No fucking way. Anger tears through me further igniting the frustration and misery of not knowing who orchestrated all of this, not to mention the trauma my baby has had to endure.

“Let me go.” I all but scream, wanting so bad to get at him, fight him.

His strong hand circles my neck, squeezing. “The fuck I will. I’m going to put a fucking chip in you. This is the last time I’m tracking your little ass down across a god damned continent. Get something straight, wife. If I wanted to kill your little dumb ass, you’d be dead and no one could prove otherwise.”

Shaking me for emphasis, a cruel smile slashes his face, making his dimples a sinister kiss. “It’d be easy to do. You’re so fucking little. I can break you without even trying. You keep pressing a motherfucker. Trying me. I should put us both out of our misery.”

I can tell he means it. Twisting, I kick his shin, trying to get free.

“Sto—”

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“Aht-aht.” He’s not playing. This is why he wants me to run. And jut like the Pavlov effect, my body responds. Shaking my head, I squirm.

“Run, little songbird.” His eyes dip. He leans into me and I feel his heavy dick pressing into me.

“I told you what would happen if you ran from me. I tried to be the good guy when I gave you my name, but now I see you want to be treated like a little slut who likes to run from her man. Now I’ve caught you, sparrow. You’ve left me no choice but to treat you like the little whore that you are.”

Ohmygoodness.

“Run, lil’motherfucker. Run for your fucking life. Because when I catch you. I’m breaking you.” His hand drops and he steps back.

Eyes full of promise and retribution are the last thing I notice before I turn running, knowing I’d have a better chance with the wild animals than the man whose heart I broke.

Chapter Twenty-Two

RUN LIL’MOTHERFUCKER

HASSAN

Iwatch my little menace run. A smile spreads across my face despite my fury. For the

first time since that night I thought my world was over, I feel at ease.

She fucked up, thinking to leave me. I've heard all the excuses as Ghad, FADE and even Sadiq tried to plead her case. How it looked. I don't give a fuck. She took me inside her body. She knows my soul. I've bared it to her.

Thinking those first twenty-four hours she and Ayaan were dead were enough to make me kill myself. It wasn't until I got the footage of them taking her did I realize she'd been taken. Then I waited for a ransom demand. When none came, it knew it was some sort of so-called rescue. Prosper Shipmoore is out of commission, so I reached out to FADE to see who cared about Lyric enough to foolishly try to take her from me. He put Ghad and Hisashi Takeda on the case and they discovered the intricate plan that made it look like I put a hit on my wife and kid. Though I don't know who the culprit is, I found out who took the job. My old friends from the Savalle Syndicate. I would never guess they would take the job, though the amount of three hundred million was enough for them to forego their rule of no women and kids.

Now I find my wife not only safely ensconced in one of their compounds, but being pampered. This is more than a crush. One of these motherfuckers is in love with her. I came here to kill either Nikko or Oz's ass, then fuck her in their blood as they bled out while either or both of them still twitched.

They did the smart thing leaving, but they will pay for interfering in my family's business.

My watch chimes. "Times up, Sparrow." Calling out into the night, I slip on my night vision goggles.

Tracking her is so easy. A natural hunter, our father trained us with the Bedouins, then the Gendarmerie and our palace secret forces.

She never had a chance, not then, not now. My shit gets hard just thinking about how I'm going to punish her.

The scent of the vanilla rose is quick to pick up. The sweet southern scent is not common in Western Cape's earthiness. It's too delicate, just like her.

I don't let her supposed softness fool me. She's a powerful woman in her own right. I was foolish to believe because she gave herself to me she wouldn't unsheathe her ruthlessness and eviscerate my soul. She did. Now I will have recompense with every inch of her body.

She's clever. I smile, pulling out the wrap she tucked into a brush. Bring it to my face as I inhale.

"Fuck," I groan, burying my face in the scent of the body butter and that which is uniquely her.

Casting my gaze to the ground, I notice her footprints. Using the quietness learned from my various training — Bedouins know how to track without leaving footprints in the sand or make noises to startle desert animals they need to sustain their tribes. Drawing back on that knowledge, I follow those little feet as they lead me deeper in Oz's managerie.

Glowing eyes of Oz's pet jaguar, Onyx meets mine as it lazily snacks on a gazelle high in a branch.

She passed this way, not even noticing him until too late from what I can tell by the way her foot prints dart with a heavier impression on the right heel as she switched direction.

"Little idiot." I mutter, promising I'll teach her about taking care in an unfamiliar

country after disciplining her for leaving me in the first place.

An amalgamation of lust and fury spur me onward. Her scent teases me with each step I take closer to her.

I almost pass her. Good girl, she hid herself well. Circling back I wait for her to come back in the opposite direction.

“Got you.” I say over the high-pitched screech as she runs right into me.

Her heart is beating out of her chest. The little piece of nothing she has on is clinging to every inch of her plump body from her exertions. Nipples budded and hard like diamonds pierce the fabric. My mouth waters, my dick firms pressing hard against my pants.

“Let me go.” She pants but her pupils are blown. She wants this. Maybe even needs it.

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“I bet your pussy says different.” She bites her bottom lip. She knows the truth, just as I do.

Stopping myself from kissing her, I give into the need to punish. “Get on your fucking knees.” Pressing her down, I watch through slitted lids as she obeys.

Something in me kicks into gear as she unzips my pants, taking my dick out. “Open.” Tugging her loose ponytail back, I watch as she licks those juicy ass lips. Taking me in hand, she laves the head, her tongue fat and pink licking the precumslipping from the head. She doesn’t miss a drop. Catching each before they fall.

“Stop playing with me,” I growl, widening my stance. Gripping the other side of her head, I press deep into her throat. Her gaze is soft when it meets mine.

“Hot ass motherfucker.” My eyes roll back as the hot warmth of her mouth encases me. My toes curl from the sensations bracketing my body. Rocking back, I plunge again, slowly fucking her mouth. Her throat is welcoming and a furnace. Tight wetness mingles with the swirl of her tongue is the stuff of dreams.

“Such a good little cumslut, letting your husband have his throat the way I want it.” I look down, watching her beautiful eyes spill from her efforts. Her work and dedication won’t be rewarded, though. This is not about pleasure, but punishment. I tap her cheek, making her open wider, angling so she can take more. Her gawk and gag have a mix of tears and wet spilling down the neck and saturating her pretty titties and tummy.

“Fucking beautiful, but you have more work to do.” Dragging her up I turn her away

in a swift motion. “Touch your toes.” She shivers at my command, yet acquiesces beautifully.

Flipping up the gown, I speak with dispassionate succinctness, “We’ll test your limits, since you’re such a bad bitch running from me.” Dragging her panties to the side, I notch the head of my dick at her entrance.

“Shh,” Slowly pushing in on a groan, I promise, “I’m never going to hurt your lil’mama. I’m just going to ruin you.”

The curve of her back dips as she relaxes around my length, allowing me to drive deeper. “That’s it. She can take me. She missed me.” Her pussy slicks at my words. “Jameela, look at how well you doing. Fuccck.”

Thrusting, I bottom out much quicker than I thought. “This motherfucker is so fat, so wet.” The sounds our bodies make areso illicit, even in the darkness of the wilderness. A symphony of wetness of our bodies slapping together.

My grip on her hips is going to leave bruises but the way I’m beating this pussy up, it’s either hold her tight or risk her flying into the ground.

Ass jiggling as she takes me, “Hassan,” keeps erupting from her beautiful lips like it’s a litany of love.

I don’t let it faze me.

“Uh-uh, take this motherfucker you ran from.” Slapping her ass in tandem, I watch it jiggle and shake. She bounces on my dick like a champ.

I feel my crisis rise. Just as I feel her pussy starts clenching as she nears her own climax. I pull out.

Immediately, she drops to her knees.

“So good, sparrow.” I cup her head as she down my dick. “Don’t swallow.” I growl, letting my nut flow into her mouth in hot, heavy spurts.

“Let me see.” The liquid honey of her gaze meets mine as she opens her mouth.

“Swallow.” Not missing a drop, she does as I command.

“You don’t get to come.” Taking her hand, I drag her behind me to the compound.

She’s been squirming in her sleep all night. Poor baby is uncomfortable. After she pleased me, we came back here to shower together. I edged her in the shower, taking my fill of her pussy in slow drags, then reacquainting myself with the delicious taste of her.

Every time she got close, I stopped, slowing, taking my attention elsewhere while she begged for me to complete her.

“Nah,” I shook my head. “I bet you couldn’t satisfy my pretty little pussy. She’s weeping for me now.” I mocked her with a sigh, though it was a struggle. Which only made me more determined to punish her for running. Not trusting me as she should. I’ve vowed to find those responsible, and I won’t rest until I do.

I know how it looks, but I don’t care, she’s knows me now. She knows we fit, is aware of all I will do to keep and protect her and Ayaan.

I rooted out those within the palace who thought to harm her. The ones who orchestrated this could have only done so because of the concert.

Baba’s and Sadiq’s investigations showed out-of-state actors, but I know it’s closer to

home and if my suspicions hold true, I will be putting more work in.

Once the news Lyric and Ayaan are alive and not under the rubble hits the news all hell will break loose. Another attempt will be made, and this time I'll have a trap well laid in advance.

Those responsible won't try to retaliate against the Savalles. No, they wouldn't be so careless. My connection to the Bastard Brothers is only known to those closest to me. They took the anonymous job to save Lyric's life. I want to know why. How is she connected to Nikko Savalle and why the fuck is he so protective of my wife? That shit still grates, though she's assured me they were childhood friends and she thought he was dead — FADE did, too. Whatever the reason or the debt he feels he owes them, he's inserted himself in my business and for that, there will be a reckoning.

My messy ass little songbird is paying for her distrust beautifully. She squirms so needily. I bite back a chuckle, not wanting her to know that I'm awake and very aware of her dilemma. Poor baby needs to come so badly.

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She shifts, sneaking her hands between her legs. I watch her through the fringe of my lashes. Slowly inching her hand down, she pauses here and there to make sure my breathing hasn't changed.

Patient as a cobra, I wait until she reaches her prize. I even let her play for a few seconds.

"Aht, aht." She stiffens as my lips brush her ear lobe. Tugging the soft flesh into my mouth, I nip, making her startle then suck, causing delicious little shivers to wrack her body.

Pressing my length into the crevice of her ass, I tsk, "You know you are forbidden from playing with my pussy."

"Please," she begs so prettily.

"Nah, I don't think so. You haven't learned not to defy me yet, songbird."

Rising from the bed, I leave her going to the bag I brought the items to carry out her discipline.

"What are you doing?" Gasping, she tries to grab the silken rope I use tying her to the bedpost.

"Punishing you. Now be a good little wife for me and lay back and take what you're owed like a good girl." I screw her with a look of promised cruelty.

“What are you going to do?” she asks instead of demanding or telling me to stop.

“Do you trust me?” Sitting back on my hunches, I wait for her answer.

She’s already nodding.

“Your actions said otherwise. So this will be your first lesson.” Smoothing my hands down her silken legs, I watch her expression closely for signs of distress. “I know you’ve only had yourself in private matters. Now you have me. You need to learn there is no one who will have your best interests at heart more than me. You’re a kinesthetic learner. So just as in other ways, I will put trusting me into practice as often as you need in the privacy of our bed until I drive the point home.” Rubbing up and down her legs, I soothe and comfort her. She’s a little jumpy.

“How are we doing, jameela?” Her mouth takes on a mutinous little pout at my question.

“I had no choice but to leave, you know that.”

“You had access to a phone and the internet when you got here.” Slowly shaking my head, I give her the soft reprimand.

“The argument was compelling.” The distraction of my hands stroking over her tummy and up to her breasts makes defending herself harder.

“You’ve made my point, sparrow.” Tweaking her nipples, makes her bite her lip. “What do you say when you need me to stop?”

“Rahma.” comes the soft reply.

“Good fucking girl.” Leaning forward, I suck her bottom lip into my mouth. Her

mouth is still sweet from brushing her teeth. She's so quick to open for me. I love that shit. Groaning, I lose myself in the delicate kiss she gifts me. Soft sips of lips move into heavy tangles of tongues and damn if she doesn't have me regretting my mission. Settling over her, I nestle into the heated wetness of her soft pussy. The head of my dick spills pre-cum in amounts so copious I may as well have a full nut.

Pulling back, marveling at the sight of our juices smeared together, making her fat pussy look glazed is enough to make me quit if I were a weaker man.

Still, I have a better idea.

Pressing a kiss to her forehead, I leave the bed. Ignoring her anguished cry of having her climax denied, I go back to the bag.

Lyric is damn near vibrating from her need for release. "I have something special for you, wife." I place two silver bullet vibes on her soft tummy.

Taking the lube, I slather them both. Watching her eyes round. "You will trust me to pleasure you in every space and in every way. Open for me, beautiful."

"Hassan," she pants with fear and eagerness. Her chest rising and falling like a hummingbird's wings.

"Shh, I got you." Focusing on my task, easing the vibrator into her slick pussy, I assure her.

"I know I haven't taken your ass yet, but I need to train you for my dick first. Relax and push down." As she presses down, I push the silver bullet in until she fully accepts it in her tight little hole.

"That motherfucker looks so pretty. Keep them open for me, sweet sparrow."

She paints the most erotic picture with both her holes filled so beautifully. Legs trembling, she does as I ask. “You’re taking them so well.” Taking the phone I pull up the app, I move it to the second lowest setting. Her body arches as if she’s been hit by electricity for a hard second. Dropping back onto the duvet, she fucks the air, body dancing on the bed as she grinds against the sensations. Her arms strain against the binds as she uses them for leverage in her frenzy seeking bliss.

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I watch her. She's in a world of her own. "Keep your legs open, jameela. Let me see you fucking that pretty pussy." I encourage her to drive me toward my own private hell.

Her pussy is drenched. The lips swelling, her fat clit popped free of its hood, begging for a touch, a lick, a spanking.

"Damn." Watching her, I'm mesmerized. I've never felt so jealous of an inanimate object in my life. Never wanted to be anything other than Price Hassan Al Rasheed in my life, but right now I want to be a fucking silver bullet being drowned in my wife's pussy.

Stepping towards her, about to take the vibes out, my phone rings with a particular tone my brother only ever uses in the case of an emergency.

I grab a robe tossed over the foot of the bed. "Yeah," belting the robe, I ask, taking a seat at the bottom of the bed, gaze never leaving the magnificent view of my lovely sparrow fucking herself.

"We have a lead." He informs me.

"Okay." Taking the bullets up to level three, I watch her body quaver as mini climax, after mini climax hits her. Hands pulling at the binds, she arches. Slumping back into the bed, she looks down at me. "Hassan?"

Disbelief rife in every syllable. I hold my finger to my lips, silencing her.

“Wassup?” turning back to the conversation at hand.

“Are you fucking?” The dry chuckle makes me smirk.

“Indeed. It’s important, is it not?” Admitting with boredom, I don’t feel. I take the dial back but to level two, watching as her thick little body starts humming again. She’s had enough of a reprieve. Her bottom clenches. Her pussy quivers. I’m captivated.

“Okay, I’ll make it quick so you can get back to your make-up session.” He laughs outright this time.

“I appreciate that, twin.” Reaching out I take one of her feet, pressing the erogenous zone behind her ankle and the center of the foot.

She stiffens momentarily, then relaxes into my touch. “Ohmygoodness,” her body quakes on the word as a tiny orgasm hits her.

She’s so slick now. Her tight little pussy is practically pulsating. The sweet muskiness emanating from her has me licking my lips.

“Ahem, okay, well, Ghad and Hasashi have narrowed it down to three possible opps.” He says over the line, giving me the names he’s checking out. None are a surprise. “When I know for sure I will let you know.”

“Shukran.” Hanging up after thanking him, I toss the robe on a nearby couch.

“I can’t believe you answered the phone.” She’s upset, but it won’t last.

“Your safety comes first.” Moving to the head of the bed, I take the robe off. Using her limited mobility, I turn her towards me. She gazes at me with pupils blown with

desire.

“I know you’ll take care of us.” Instinctively I know she means it.

“Yeah?” I murmur, looking down into the amber of her gaze.

Taking her lips again, I reward her with a kiss and she blesses me right back. Soaking in the vulnerability and trust she’s rewarded me, I feel my heart expand to a frightening degree. This woman slays me.

The kiss deepens and soon I find myself settling back between luscious thighs she’s kept open for me.

“Such a good ass wife. Keeping this pussy open. Shall I kiss it?” Moving my hand between us. I take out the vibe nestled inside of her luscious pussy.

“Umm, no. I just want you, Hassan.” She begs so adorably.

“Damn girl,” Notching the head of my dick at her entrance, I push in at a painstakingly slow pace, stretching her to fit me as I go. “You’re so fucking tight.”

Her body still welcomes me, sucking me in like the greedy little thing it is. I turn the vibe still nestled in her ass up to three.

My toes curl as heat and wetness surround me. She envelopes me in the snuggest hug, nearly strangling my dick. I’d gladly die like this if it meant never leaving the comfort of her arms.

Reaching up, I loosen the binds. Immediately, her arms encircle me. Legs wrapping around me as best she can, she allows me to sink deeper. Bottoming out, I revel in the closeness, the feel of our bodies meshed together. Like this, there is no beginning to

her and no end to me. We are one.

“Incredible.” She kisses my neck, sucking the flesh there into her mouth hard, marking me.

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Sliding out, I slam back. Relishing the click of her teeth. She bites me in response. The sting makes my dick kick. I slam home again, bottoming out in her hot little snatch.

This motherfucking snapdragon grabs me like it doesn't want to let go. My ass cliches trying to hold back the nut she's trying to choke out of me.

"Fucck, you taking me so good, Sparrow." Fucking her deep and long, I bring her leg up high over my arm as I hit her A-spot.

"T-too much. I can't take it." She stammers, trying to hold me back, pressing on my abdomen.

"Fuck that." I growl slow-rolling into that spot. "You can and you will." Making her take me, I hit the deepest part of her fat ass pussy. The gush of that sweet spot of hers feels like heaven. The muscles spasming as her resistance gives away to bliss is nearly my undoing.

"Come with your man, lil'mama." I demand fucking her hard now. Damn, I'm close. Tiny nails grip and rake my ass as I pound my pleasure home.

"Has-san." She cries, her pussy clenching as she creams all over me.

Hot jets of my come bathe her easing my way. So caught up I can't stop, my hips piston into her again, and again. Stars dance behind my eyes as I put my seed into my pretty little wife.

Rolling to the side, I pull her over me. Our bodies still in engage, I can still feel her spasms as she comes down from her climax.

“You’re amazing, sparrow.” Pressing soft kisses on her forehead, I ease the vibe out of her bottom.

I say the words, I should have before. “You’re an amazing mother. The choice you made for Ayaan was the right one at the time. You didn’t know me then. I broke your trust that night though I didn’t know it at the time. You were perfectly within your rights not to trust me then.” Cupping her face, I make her look at me. “I will never betray you, Lyric, in any way. I made vows to you when I made you my wife. I vow now, I will never break them.”

Tears well, in her eyes. She presses her forehead to mine. Her next words slaying me.

“Habibi.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

FOR MY BIGGEST FAN

LYRIC

The sun has been brutal all day. Looking up from my notebook I watch my little one run and stumble on his strong little legs though the water sprinklers and toys place along the garden. His skin glistens with the sunscreen slathered over every inch of his sturdy little body.

High pitch giggles reach me from when I sit and watch him. I dredged up every ounce of energy I have to be here, present with him. Watching him brings me so much joy. I can’t help smiling at his antics.

The weather is warming to where Ayaan can only enjoy himself in the late afternoon, which makes for later bedtimes. We've been back almost a month. Things have been good. Almost too good and serene.

Hassan, Ayaan and I have slipped into blissful domesticity. Hassan works for the kingdom all day, coming home in time to either have dinner with us or put Ayaan to bed. Then we bathe and make love until we fall apart in exhausted bliss.

The only thing is — I don't trust it. I trust him. He's more than proven himself as well as driving home the point nightly. Still, I don't want to allow myself to hope we can be happy like this forever. I'm scared to even think there is a possibility of me having a life where I have a soft place to fall or someone other than me or FADE to count on like I've had, since I was a seventeen-year-old girl faced with the impossible choice of keeping baby I didn't want or take a chance that was never going to come my way again.

A figure emerges from the dense thicket of garden wall, almost making me think she's a mirage. Khadijah.

I sit higher. She must be visiting Amani, who's come home for a lengthy visit from Sophia University in Japan. It's wild to think that in these few short months, me and this girl have switched places.

Watching as she nervously approaches, I have to admire the way she deftly dodges the water spray Ayaan's playing in. She giggles, waving to him. He stops as if spellbound before racing over to her, water clinging from every part of his body.

Before I can call out to stop him, he's barreling into her legs, his sopping wet curls drenching her skirts.

"Dija." He giggles, hugging her legs. My ears perk up hearing the nickname he has

for her. Since when has my son formed a bond with this woman?

Bending, she ruffles his spiky curls. “Hi, my little guy.” She coos.

What is going on here? Confusion and apprehension slithering down my spine. I’d not thought Khadijah had been back at the palace since the day I saw her hugging Hassan. Obviously, I’m wrong.

Amani has been here off and on. Though through this tumultuous so-called honeymoon phase of our marriage, the family has largely left Hassan, Ayaan and me to our own devices, except for the outreach to the earthquake survivors.

A smile plays across her lips as she disengages from Ayaan, continuing towards me.

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Trying to keep the question from playing across my face, I rise to greet my husband's ex-fiancée.

"Khadijah, you arrived in time to distract me from the boredom of the day." I say, with the practiced aplomb gained from the hours of lessons from the palace protocol secretary has driven into me.

"I know I'm intruding, High Consort, but I wanted to speak to you while I had the chance." The hope shining in her eyes is unsettling. I'm reminded then she's a self described superfan of the Empress. I wonder briefly if that's why she's here.

"No worries." Waving toward the seat opposite me, I sit. Another wave of exhaustion hits me just then. I sink down on the sofa with all the grace of a newborn fawn.

"I'm sorry to hear of all the trouble you've had to endure lately." She apologizes, her sincerity breaking through the posh facade.

"That's very sweet of you." Giving her a gentle smile that I actually mean, despite my distrust, I get to the point of her visit, "Is that why you snuck away to see me?" my mouth quirks up.

Her smile is disarmingly genuine. Taking a deep inhale as if to gather her courage, she forges on. "I don't know if Hassan mentioned how much I love you." Her hands grasp tightly together as she leans forward with her admission. Her eyes shine with unmitigated joy. I think it's just being close to me. I've seen it before.

My nod barely registers before she plunges into her requests. "I love Hassan very

much — but like a brother. I knew what was expected. Marrying him was drilled into me from the moment I could understand what a boy was.” She smiles sadly. “I was going to do my duty, but when I went to school, I met someone and we became friends because that is all we could ever be until you and Hassan were blessed with sweet Ayaan.” She looks down for a moment, then back up, tears in her eyes. “It was the best possible thing that could ever happen to Deacon and me.” She blushes so prettily I can’t help but smile.

“Deacon Shipmoore?” I ask, wondering if she means Prosper’s younger brother.

“Yes.” She nearly swoons. “He’s amazing. My parents approve — well, Umm does. Which is why I wanted to ask a huge favor...” Hope shines through as she hedges to ask the question burning inside of her to get out.

“I’d love to sing at your wedding.” I love my fans, regardless of whether they are billionaire heiresses.

A pretty blush flushes her cheeks. Tears brim and spill over her eyes. “This is amazing. It’s a dream come true.”

I give her a moment to get herself together, then lean in all business. “I don’t require compensation because you are like a sister to Hassan, Sadiq and Amani, and Ayaan adores you.” Though I will be speaking to my husband as soon as he gets home to find out how that happened. I need to know everyone my baby comes into contact with. Hell, I was just poisoned and attacked twice, being around these damn people.

“Of course I’m happy to do whatever you need.” She charges ahead with an enthusiastic grace.

“That’s lovely,” and it was. Anyone would find it hard not to like this young woman. “However, it’s your father’s help the kingdom needs. Hassan mentioned he needs his

construction teams out in the field helping to rebuild and refortifying the cities affected by the earthquake and Jhori was not amenable to the terms.” A flush of embarrassment rides high on her cheeks, so much so that soon her entire face is red beneath her light almond complexion.

“Khadijah?” Both our heads snap around to Amani sweeping into the garden from my suite of all places, concern etched on her face as her gaze sweeps over us. Her jade gaze, similar to her brothers, alights on me, barely suppressed anger registers before she can and smother it with a practiced public face.

She’s been nothing but polite, but it’s not lost on me she’s just as upset about the cancellation of her bestie’s marriage now as when it was first called off. Right now, it seems even more so.

“Mani!” Ayaan all but screams, racing over to my sister-in-law like she’s a long-lost friend.

Just as he reaches her, arms outstretched, he stumbles. My heart jumps. I lunge forward though I’d never make it in time, his name ripping from my lips, “Ayaan—” like he’s the first baby in creation to fall.

Amani’s quicker on her feet than one would think a pampered princess could ever be.

Sweeping his soggy form into her body. “Hey little man,” she coos, burying her head in his curls. “Amma missed you.”

He allows this all of a two minutes, which is an eternity in toddler time before squirming to be free. Which has her bursting out in a little chuckle before setting him back on his sturdy feet.

“Marharba.” I keep standing to welcome her. When she approaches, I kiss both

cheeks, gesturing for her to sit with us.

“Ahawat.” Nodding to us, she greets us both as her sisters. She looks at the tea service. That silent communication is all it takes for an attendant to emerge with a new tray with fresh tea and refreshments.

The gentle smells wafting up around us should be comforting, but a strange queasiness assails me. Swallowing back the saliva filling mouth, I attempt to focus on the beautiful women before me.

They look like beautiful butterflies in light pastels flowing dresses. I can tell they were raised to be princesses. They are comfortable in the skin they are in. I made myself into an empress and I’m just as comfortable. I know I earned the place I have in this world. The fact I feel right at home among royalty isn’t lost on me.

“How are you today, Lyric?” Her quizzical expression rests on me as if she thought I asked for this meeting. “I was wondering where you got off to. I go to chat with Kenji and the next thing I know you’re gone, like you have an assignation.” She pins us both with hard scrutiny. I can’t help but notice how much she looks like her brothers.

“And how is Kenji? Is he going to work with his cousins in the US or stay in Tokyo?” I ask about her fiancé giving Khadijah time to form a response if she even wants to give one.

“As Allah would have it, Kenji will stand up a Takeda Industries start up here. Babba and Umm are very amenable and Hassan has agreed it is a great opportunity to extend the tech industry to Morocco.” She beams with elation.

“That’s amazing.” I say, taking the Moroccan mint tea, adding a hint of sugared ginger to settle my tummy.

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“Shukran lake.” Giving me, brief smile she turns to her bestie. “What’s going on?”

“I-I asked Lyric to sing at my wedding,” Khadijah rushes out.

“I told you —” Shaking her head, she looks between us, her mouth pressed into a firm line of disapproval. “Hassan will not be pleased.”

“He’ll be okay. This is my decision.” I cut in. So much of my autonomy has been striped from me. If I can get more of it back by singing for Khadijah, then I’m going to take it.

“He’s not going to like it,” Amani advises.

“Let me worry about that.” I say with more confidence than I feel. “Here, have some petite fours.” I hold out the tray to them with a determined smile.

“I see you are determined to keep putting your life in danger.” The deep baritone has me looking up over the book I’m reading.

“Who told you, Amani?” I snap the dark academia set at spooky college Savannah away with a snap, ready to go to her rooms and give her a piece of my mind.

“Did she tell you she’s been sneaking Ayaan out of his rooms to play when she comes home?” I ask, taking a sip of the tea that seems very symbolic of all the gossip spreading around this messy ass palace.

“No, and she wasn’t the one to tell me. I have spies everywhere. Mainly to protect

you and Ayaan, but they also inform me of potential threats.” Striding over to my side of the bed, he sits beside me, taking my hand, since I put the tea down at this stunning revelation.

“How long have you had people watching me?” I ask.

He looks at me for a long moment, then sighs, ripping his hands through his dense curls. “Since the attack by Asif. I wanted to respect your privacy but that went out the window after the poisoning. Now, there are guards posted at key points since people think they can take you from me — for your safety.” He lets that last part dangle there as a mark against Nikko Savalle, which he thinks is still unresolved.

“If you expect this to work, you have to include me on things — High Consort or not.” My words are soft, but my stare is hard. “The position you put me naming me High Consort has had far-reaching consequences. I don’t know how you can’t see it.” I’m so dang proud of myself for not screaming my frustration into his beautifully cruel face.

The moments that follow are tense. I ready myself for the anger and threats.

“I fucked up.” The words seem ripped from him. Somber jade eyes meet mine as he laces his fingers through mine in a strong, unyielding grip.

“I lost my mind when I found out about Ayaan. All I thought about was punishing you. Then I became obsessed with keeping you. Knowing you don’t need me, I took your choice — because I could. It was the move of a fucking coward, not the man you or our son deserve. Still, I’ll not lie and say that I won’t do everything in my power to keep you. I can’t fucking breathe without you. All I can promise is to earn my place by your side.”

Bending his head, he presses a soft kiss to the back of my hand. Raising his eyes to

meet mine, he slowly turns my hand, exposing my palm. Gaze never leaving mine he presses a warm kiss to the center of my palm. Everything intimate seizes within me at the sign of devotion, admiration.

“Hibibti, will you be my Queen Consort?”

In that moment, the lyrics of the song I never got to sing to him, flood through me.”

The words resonate in every fiber of me when I whisper. “Yes.”

The words resound when I take him inside of me and he whispers those words over me again and again. I know he means them with every fiber of my being.

The words crash around me as he takes me to paradise and we transcend even that.

The words cloak me when he holds me and whispers his promise of life time again, “You are mine and I respect you, I will value you, love only you, I will be tender to you.”

Cupping is face I say back to him, “You are mine, Hassan, I will respect you, I will value you, love only you and I will be tender to you.”

His hand covers mine. “I never imagined I’d find the one who spoke to my heart.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

THE EMPRESS GET’S HER LICK BACK

LYRIC ~THE WEDDING~

“Gotdamn, I love her,” Hassan’s heavy whisper tickles my ear and can’t help but

giggle. “You can tell you got your start with hip-hop videos.”

“Aye. It made me and Sadiq billionaires.” He shrugs with the arrogance of someone who made his own way. I smirk, knowing exactly how that feels.

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“Thank you for asking Anaïs to meet with me about the champagne branding.” I give him the doe eyes I know he can’t resist.

“Damn, you keep looking at me like that. I’ll bring Akchiro Takeda himself to meet with you,” he chuffs, adjusting himself just as the car pulls into the covered garage of the venue.

Just then, my phone chimes. “Hey, babe.” Smiling down at Fi and an already wiggling Ayaan, I lean over so Hassan can see his son’s antics.

“Ayaan.” One word of authority from his daddy has my son straitening and acting like he has some sense. “Be good for Fi until we get back.”

Ayaan nods, like he’s been given a huge responsibility.

“Okay, Baba.” He beams at us over the video chat.

Hassan absently rubs soothing circles on my back, knowing how hard it was for me to leave our son. Last time I did an event we all almost lost our lives and unlike the crew Asif led, we still haven’t found the crew or the ringleaders.

Every security precaution has been put in place as a deterrence. Hassan reached out to the Nikko and his Bastard Brother Syndicate to see if there were any whispers within their network about doing a job.

“They’d expect us to finish the job we were entrusted with, Hassan.” They told us in the SCIF Hassan set up to share secret intelligence about my safety.

Now that I'm Crown Princess; a title bestowed secretly after the first attack. Then publicly the night after he spoke new words of promise to me. My safety is a matter of national security.

"After the attack, I realized I'd inadvertently I put you in danger. Immediately, I rectified that, but making it public will leave no doubt." The decree went out the same day.

Many things changed soon after. The irreverence the press used in the coverage of me ended. I assume they feel more loyalty to Her Royal Highness than a High Consort. No matter the title, I'm the Empress tonight.

The new driver opens the door with a bow. Hassan steps out, reaching in to take my hand like I'm his cherished treasure. The crowd swoons when he presses a chaste kiss to the back of my hand.

Hands linked, we make our way into the venue. I'm scheduled to sing a set at the venue. Khadijah cleverly came up with the idea of having a pay-per-view exclusive that will show me performing only for a people willing to pay and undisclosed amount for the privilege. The FOMO had millionaires and a billionaire willing to pay upward of ten-thousand dollars aticket. That alone nearly fully funded several of the many infrastructure projects Hassan has planned for the earthquake survivors.

"I'm glad I get to witness the nuptials." I tell Hassan as we are shown our seats of honor.

Soon Khadijah is brought in on the amira, with her wedding party celebrating all around her.

Deacon, his brothers and several friends follow. Though this is a moment of celebration, with the looks of Bishop, Porter and Priest Shipmoore shoot our way, I

can think nothing less than menacing.

They definitely blame us for Prosper's disappearance, and from the looks on their faces, they will confront Hassan at the first opportunity.

Forcing my attention to away from their stony expressions of the billionaire Shipmoore brothers, I focus on the beautiful ceremony.

The love that Deacon Shipmoore has for Khadijah is so palpable. My heart nearly bursts when she reaches up and wipes a stray tear from his hard, chiseled jaw.

The praises and cheers are overwhelming as soon as the marriage is blessed by the smiling Imam. They have a secular wedding planned in Great Britain, later. In interviews, Deacon said he hoped that his sister, Prosper, would be able to attend.

"Your Highness, if you'd follow me." An attendant bows before me as the wedding guests are led to the reception area.

"I'll see you in there." Smiling up at Hassan, I move to follow the attendant, but he stops me.

"Aye." He stops me before I can make a move to follow the woman. "If anything seems off, hit the code. Your security is outside the door." He reminds me of the security protocols drilled into me since the return from Western Cape.

"I know, babe." I say for his ears only as he presses a kiss to the crown of my head with reverence he's shown more and more every day.

"You have your watch and phone." He flashes his for emphasis.

"I'll call you." Cupping his face. I kiss him, not caring of the audience. I watch as a

self-satisfied smile spreads across his face.

Damn, he fine. I think to myself and I give him a little wave as I follow the attendant out.

As soon as I step out into the corridor, I'm flanked by my six black garbed guards on either side. Totally protected on all sides, I walk with confidence down the hall to the room assigned for me.

I'd had my costumes sent ahead. Fi designed an ornate headpiece which would allow me not to have to change my hair style.

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The piece is a masterwork that symbolized my reign as the Empress. Tonight is the night, I finally say publicly what has largely been speculation from the moment I wedded Hassan — I'm retiring from singing.

I'll miss performing. Full stop, there is nothing like the love and adoration of my fans. But I one thing realized as I visited the people who suffered the tragedy of the earthquake is serving others is just as fulfilling. It's different for sure and I don't ever think I will ever be a traditional wife. A queen for her people, yes. We all have our special gifts and mine is making people loved by my presence. I realize my spirit for service is just as great as the one I have preforming.

"Shukran," I say to the guards who've protected me on this little journey to my dressing room.

Walking in to the spacious dressing room, which is actually three times the size of any I have had while on tour. I notice the elaborate headdress Fi designed. "It looks heavy." She assuredme when I said I was scared I'd break my neck trying to wear it. "It's light but pointy." She had the nerve to snicker as Fariq and I look on marveling at her creation.

"You are amazing," He said, looking at her with adoration shining in his eyes.

In that moment, I realized that despite the circumstances that brought us here, we both found what our hearts long for — partners who see us. Love us as we. I feel like we won.

Taking in the sheer size of the room, I take in the lengths Khadijah went to make me

feel pampered and appreciated. “Deacon and I have a surprise for you.” There are lounges placed in inviting groups in case I wanted to have my entourage with me. I decided to keep it small. Who it seems, is a little late. There is a massage table and a chair overlooking the city. Walking deeper into the room, I see a bathtub ready if I want to freshen up after my performance. Though, I appreciate the sentiment. I’m leaving when I’m done. Bouquets of flowers from the bride and groom, their families and the fans cover every surface. Some stand as tall as my five-foot-three. There are also enough gifts here to rival those of the bride. Though her daddy may not be a happy camper, the rest of the family surely has no problem showing their appreciation. “Y’all take this hospitality stuff seriously.” I whisper, looking at the triple tier pink diamond necklace gifted by her oldest brother, Jhadari.

It wasn’t lost on me after our impromptu meeting that her fiancé reached out to Hassan to make the arrangements for the wedding and not her father.

“I’d hope that the Ben Saladins would come to the table since it was so well known that Jhori dotes on his daughter.” I told Hassan a few days later as we bathed together.

“Not that prideful motherfucker.” Hassan muttered, as he made long swathes, caressing my back with the loofa. “It’s fine. I’ll never beg a bitch to do anything for me. Just as he made his billions doing work for the kingdom, so can another. Now, come let me put you to bed. You look exhausted.” Hugging me to him, he rose out of the bath, then took his time drying me off. Which proved to kick me right out of the tiredness plaguing me and straight onto his dick.

The thing about Hassan is how intentional he’s being in showing me his love. He didn’t like me doing this for Khadijah, but he’ supported me just the same.

My security has quadrupled. I can talk to my sisters now that I have my phone back.

“Did you put a tracker on my damn phone?” I pressed Hassan on a hunch.

“You bet your little ass I did, wife.” He quipped back. “Would you prefer it in your body?”

Baby steps, I reminded myself, taking the phone back and updating my social media. Anaïs immediately reached out, wanting to negotiate the terms of the merger with her brand. I’d have to remain a silent partner, which is fine with me. I want as much anonymity as possible in the next phase of my life.

Knowing I can’t wait for the hairstylist of the wardrobe assistant any longer, I step over to the clothing wrack. At first I’m confused by what I’m seeing. Feet are propped up and sticking out beneath the dresses, like the Wicked Witch of the West. Confusion has me frowning down at what I’m seeing for longer than it should.

“Their deaths are your fault, whore.” The wrathful words have me spinning around, into the hate filled face of Jhori Bin Saladin. That’s when I see the second woman — the hair and make-up artist hired for the event slumped behind him against the wall with her head hanging at an odd angle.

Before the words register, he’s grabbing me by the throat, trying to break my neck. He doesn’t count on the fact that Didi’s cousin, Xander-Rafe LeRoi, taught me how to defend myself back when I first went on the road along with his sisters and cousins back when he first joined the BPB. I kept those lessons up and when I got my money up and wanted to hire him as my personal security, he declined, because serving the people of Birmingham means so much to him. He still flew out every year to coach me for a few weeks.

So that’s how Jhori Bin Saladin fucked around and found out I was the wrong one to try to kill. Instead of grabbing his wrists, I stick my arms between his arms and break his hold on my throat with an upthrust and outward motion.

Immediately, I punch him in the throat. His height makes it impossible to get a straight shot. My knuckles glance off to the side.

He stumbles back but manages to backhand me, causing me to crash into the headrest place on a settee. Stars dance in front of my vision. Blood fills my mouth and I immediately feel my cheek swelling.

“You’re nothing. My daughter will be queen.” Heaving, he smiles at my quizzical expression. “Accidents happened all the time. And Deacon Shipmoore will have a rather tragic one. Then, after an appropriate time of grieving, Khadijah and Hassan will find each other again. She will give him the legitimate heirs the Al Rasheed line deserves. No Black American mongrels.” The malice in his gaze lets me know this motherfucker has absolutely no qualms about killing my baby.

“If you think Hassan can be manipulated like that and he will just marry Khadijah, you are fucking delusional. Bitch, I’m irreplaceable.” I say with pride. “I love your daughter, but she could never be me. Why do you think she took her L with so much grace? She loves Deacon, sure, but even she knows there’s no comparison with the Empress.” The way he swells up like the Hulk is almost laughable.

He charges, ready to tear me to shreds. I don’t let that cause fear. “Always stay calm. Conquer your fear, Empress. That’s how you survive.” I can hear Xander-Rafe LeRoi’s words in my ear as I let him barrel down on me full speed.

Just as he throws his body forward, I grab the headrest, pulling it tight against my body. Fi’s famous pointy end thrust outward. Too late, he realizes his mistake as he impales himself on the gilded crown headrest. Like Fi said, it’s light but pointy. The sharp end spears him in the chest.

Shock and hate fill the stare above me. A stream of blood spills from the corner of his mouth. His body is rigid as he fights death for the few miserable seconds it takes the

devil to drag his ass to hell.

Finally he slumps. His body is heavy as hell. Pushing my cramping hands outward as I shift my body to one side, I manage to shove his heavy ass off me.

He lands with a muffle thump. Thick, dark blood rapidly fills his pristine white shirt. Soon it pools beneath him. I stumble back against the chaise in my haste to get away, not wanting it to touch me more than the copious amounts that have already dripped on me when he skewered himself.

Saying I have the heebie-jeebies is an understatement. I feel gross with his blood marring the beautiful creation Summer made me for the event. On shaky legs, I make my way over the short distance to the settee furthest away from the bodies. I press my watch to summon my villain prince.

“Lyric.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:46 am

I don't know how long I sit there staring into space.

“Lyric, habibti?” I look up into the jade gaze of Hassan, though he's brought himself down on my level.

Concern etches his face. “What happened to you?” his voice is soft, calm but his gaze is fraught with intense emotions.

“He — um.” I stop, the words seeming to escape me.

“Lyric?” He sounds alarmed. Shaking me a little, he gets my attention to focus back on him.

“Tell me what happened.” His tone is sharper now, broking no refusal.

Raising a trembling finger, I motion to the back of the room.

Rising, he places a comforting hand on my shoulder before leaving me there for an interminable amount of time.

Minutes tick by, then I hear him speaking to someone on the phone. I hear the heavy tread of his feet as he re-approaches me.

He gets on his hunches facing me. “You did good, sweetheart.” Cupping the unbruised side of my face, he presses a reverent kiss on my forehead.

Hot tears spill down my cheeks. Still, the words don't come.

Gathering me into the safety of his arms, he gently brushes the hair that came loose in the struggle out of my face.

“A team is going to come to secure this room. I’m having the venue cleared as we speak. Then I will take you home. It will be like nothing ever happened.” All this is whispered into my ear.

“I k-ki—” a firm long finger presses against my lips. His hard gaze focuses on me. He shakes his head. I clamp my mouth shut as I read the communication he’s giving that anyone could be listening.

“There is a terrorist threat. The venue is being cleared, then we are going home. Understood?” He waits for my jerky nod.

“I’m so fucking proud of you, sparrow.” From the look in his eyes, I know he means it.

The shock from the ordeal gradually subsides as I let my husband hold me.

The knowledge settles on me. I saved my life. I’ve been through too much to let some entitled billionaire take my life.

A knock sounds on the door. Hassan sits me back on the settee, rising to move the door.

Two massive men come through the door. Strangers. One has white blood hair, and the other is jet black. Though I’d never seen them before in my life from how Nikko described his brothers, all having silver eyes. I know they are Volk and Kairi Savalle, two of the Bastard Brothers. In the days that followed my Western Cape visit, Hassan told me the violent history of the Bastard Brothers, including their names.

“Nikko says hello, Empress.” The blond says with a heavy Russian accent. His tall lithe counterpart shoots him a dispassionate look, then gives Hassan and me a brief bow.

“I thought he’d send a team.” Hassan says by way of salutation.

“We were in the vicinity.” Volk shrugs, “In case there was another mishap.”

So Nikko was had them in place, there was another attempt on my life.

“Your concerns were correct, it seems. Where are the bodies?” Kairi asks, heading to the rear of the room as if by instinct.

“Chop him up, throw him out to sea or burn him don’t give a fuck,” Hassan says.

“Return the women to their families. I will compensate their families for their loss.”

Striding over the clothing rack, Hassan takes down a thick black robe I normally use after performances. Drawing me to my feet, he drapes the voluminous material around me, making sure to cover my head.

Pulling me into the crook of his arms, he whispers, “Let’s go home, songbird.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

SOFT GIRL ERA

HASSAN

I listen to her be sick. Getting up from the bed, I go over to the bathroom, leaning against the jam. I see her come out of the toileting area, creeping like a thief, heading over to the sink like she's slick or some shit. Brushing her teeth in a hurried fashion. I just know she's trying to be done so she can sneak back in bed with me being none the wiser.

Little does she know I've known from the moment she started getting sick. Before that even.

"So you were going to keep this one a secret too," I growl, prowling over to her, ignoring the way her reflexion startles in the mirror.

Our eyes clash for a hot second before she slowly starts shaking her head.

"No, I just wanted to make sure everything was okay. Dr. Aaziz said I could have a hard time carrying another baby because of the poisoning." The little negligent shrug she gives makes me incensed, because I know she's only doing it to cover her fear. I know all her tells now.

"And you thought what? If you lost a baby, you'd keep it from me?" Stalking over to her, I grab her slight shoulders, turning her around to face me.

"We were supposed to be done with that shit." Narrowing my gaze on her bruised cheek. All she's been through rushes back to my mind. "I don't care if we ever have another child, Lyric. I told you this. I'm in this for you — for eternity."

I sigh. “With all the shit that you’ve had to go through, I get it, sparrow. Just let me do some of the heavy lifting for you.” Cupping her other cheek, I press a kiss to her brow.

“It’s futile trying to keep things from me at this point. Your cycles have been monitored from the moment you arrived at the palace.” I can’t help but chuckle at her gasp.

“You’re lying,” she shakes her head. “Of all the controlling?—”

“It’s a practice that’s been in place for millennia.” I shrug. “Now as Crown Princess you get to change that and other archaic practices like taking princes from their mothers for instruction before they can barely walk.”

I can already see her mind working on that as well as the progressive issues that will probably have me adding another layer of security. The palace officials are going to hate to see my little songbird coming.

“Hmph,” she mutters noncommittally. I watch as she starts her morning face routine.

Moving so that I’m behind her, I bend to press a kiss into the hollow of the neck. “No more secrets, Habibti. I’d hate to take away your privileges.” Letting the warning register, I watch as her mouth forms into the cutest little pout. I won’t be swayed. The moment she sees my determination. She crosses her arms across her chest, wincing a little when the pressure registers on her sensitive breasts.

“You’re being mean.” Tears well in her eyes.

Two things register. I missed these emotions the first time she was pregnant. The second — I’m blessed to witness it all this time.

“You knew I was a mean motherfucker from the start.” Circling my arms around her, I bring them to rest on her belly. “My vow to you, sparrow, is I’m your mean motherfucker. I’ll protect you and our babies.” Her eyes meet mine in the mirror. The love them fucking slays me.

“If you want to go back on tour, I’ll support you in that as well.” I mean it with every part of my being. Taking her away from what she loved was a bitch move.

“Hassan.” She pauses, taking a moment to let my words sink in. Biting her lip, she forges on. “I never even considered it.”

“Consider it.” My words are emphatic. “Loving you means letting you fly free, knowing and trusting that you will come back to me. And I know you will every time, Lyric. You never wavered, not once since you dawned the door of this palace. You stepped into your role as queen from the moment you took your vows. Never hesitating. Not even when I thought to take the power of the queen from you. You stood in your purpose as none other than an Empress could.

As mad as I was for thinking you tried to leave me, I still had to respect how you carried yourself. Then when I found out the truth?—”

“Truth—”

“Fariq has been my friend since we were five years old, habibti. Did you really think he wouldn’t tell me it was Fi concluding with Prosper?” I give her a sidelong glance. “It only proved to me that your loyalty is paramount. I knew then I wanted to earn that kind of devotion from you.”

“Ohmygoodness, Hassan.” Whispering the words, she brings her arms around my neck, linking them. “It broke my heart not being able to tell you. I want to earn yours too.”

“You already have, Jameela.” Comes my gruff reply. “I’m in awe of you.”

Sinking down before my queen. “How about we try this again?”

Reaching up, I swipe the tears falling from her eyes. She nods, the words locked up. The smile brimming on her face says it all.

“Minus motherfuckers trying to kill you.”

Nodding, she comes to her knees, meeting me where I am. She’s always done that, I realize in that moment — met me where I was. I just wasn’t ready to be the man she needed, so caught up in my need to punish. All that is over, I promise to myself then, just as I had to her moments before.

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Taking her lips, I seal the promise. Her lips are sweet. Later, her pussy is even sweeter. Part of me thinks it's her being pregnant, yet still deep down I know it's the pleasure of the new commitment we've made to each other.

A YEAR LATER

Cradling my little, Antonia, named after my great-great grandmother. I watch my little songbird sing the song she saved as a surprise just for me.

All that I am

All that I hope to be

All of my desires

You've shown me in loving me

All the possibilities

I have not been perfect

I've not always been kind

Yet still in you I found compassion

Your love has allowed me to shine

I never thought I'd find a love so true

I never let myself even dream

Of the reality that we now share

That nothing can ever compare

You are my love and I am yours

A dream a hope a revelation

You say that in loving me you found home

Habibi you are my safety, my pleasure

My love my are my treasure

My heart soars hearing the words she wrote for just me. The last year has been one of the greatest blessings. Trails remain but, Inshallah, I wouldn't take one second from it. I have a beautiful daughter who made her appearance with vocals to rival those of her mother.

"She's going to be a mezzo soprano." Lyric crooned, singing her favorite lullaby to our little princess just last night.

Though she says this is her last tour, I don't know if I believe that. I don't know if I even want that to be true. She shines on the stage as she takes in the love from the crowd. I'm man enough to let her stand in her purpose and shine as my princess as Empress.

A queen in every sense of the word. Even pregnant, she managed to forge a relationship with little Zayn.

“Umm!” Zayn calls out with Ayaan, along with the crowd calling for the Empress. His transition into our family seamless. Lyric fell in love with him and I did immediately when she brought him for a visit.

It took some time to build trust, but eventually he asked us to be his parents.

She scans the crowd but her gaze rises until she her gaze reaches where we stand cheering her high above the masses.

“I love you, Habibi,” my heart nearly explodes knowing she means only me. Knowing the feeling to be love by one such as her is amazing.

She wipes tears of happiness from her cheeks and I can’t wait to kiss them away when our little family is reunited.

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Cuddling my daughter, I gather my sons as the curtains close and go to join my wife, my empress, sparrow, songbird. My love.

Chapter Twenty-Six

THE FINAL RETRIBUTION

Hassan ~Unknown Black Site

Blinking when the blindfold finally lifts with a rough tug, I give myself a second to allow my vision to adjust to my surroundings. Adjusting the bag holding my kit on my shoulder, I look at the deep cavern before me. Lights line the path at strategic distances, so one can only see just ahead to the next one. The space is as wide and long as a football field. I know from the pulsing silence we are underground and this place is soundproof.

It's dark, so that helps. The smell of blood, piss, and excrement flares in my nostrils with a pungency speaking of desperation and fear.

Screwing my gaze on what lies in front of me, I step further out of the door of the SUV. I take in the scene surrounding me.

A figure of a man twists, rattling the chains, making the clink in a manner I find particularly annoying.

"This bitchass motherfucker." Rolling my shoulders, I take my jacket off, handing it to the masked figure walking beside who grunts.

“I’m not your body man,” he bitches in thickly accented Russian as we stalk to the morbid tableau before us. Have to admit the closer I get to my prey, my stride turns jaunty.

“Humph, sure, Volk.” Ignoring his grumbling, I come to stand beside Nikko Savalle and the unfortunate but very deserving of death degenerate thrashing in the chains.

“We good?” he asks, never taking his attention from the nude pedophile dangling before us.

“Nah, we ain’t never gone be good, man. You’ll be working off taking my family for a while. But,” I nod toward this figure before us. “This is a good start.”

“Told you we should’ve just killed him.” Comes a voice from the other side of Nikko. Another tall figure emerges from the darkness strapped to the gills.

I look over to the chilling gaze of Ozymandias Love. “Seems like you got more than enough on your plate, my friend. How’s your little houseguest?” I give a soft chuckle at the barest flare of acknowledgment in his silver eyes.

I wink at him, letting him know he needs to be quiet as kept before a certain Colombian cartel is tearing through his shit again and sooner than he likes.

“You got him. He disappeared for a hot second.” I say, looking at the man sweating his ass off, pleading through the ball-gag shoved tight against his lips.

“Yeah, but the greedy motherfucker couldn’t resist trying to sell what was mine.” Nikko grits out, pulling his bottom lip between his teeth, biting down hard with his need to end this bitch.

“Aight, let me get to work.” Take my bag off my shoulder. I lave my kit on a

stainless steel table. “There is a sink to rinse if needed.” Kairi informs me. His keen interest in my array of tools is obvious by the way he leans forward. This motherfucker gives the stoicism of the Takedas a run for their money.

He nods in approval as when I finish laying out my knives, put perks up with a wide smile when I lay out the last items.

“A rib spreader? An Enucleation spoon? Hmm.” He nods with appreciation.

“Prep this, will you?” His eyes light up when I pass him the adrenaline and the syringe. “Don’t want him passing out when we get to the fun part.” Snatching the castration blinders from my kit, I stand before the man who harmed my beloved.

“Rob, Rob, Rob,” I tsk, shaking my head. Flicking a gaze at the men assemble, I mutter. “Legs. Fire the poker.” Nikko does the honors of lighting the furnace and shoving the poker within.

“I hear you like raping little girls —”

“And taking pictures and videos of the innocent and selling them to sick fucks like yourself to the highest bidder.” Come the wrathful voice of my new brother-in-law as he works the poker with relish in the flames.

Damn, he’s sick. Lyric wasn’t his daughter. Song is his blood-related kid.

Now, I see what it cost Nikko to let me have this final retribution.

“You’re never making it out of here alive. How long you take to die is up to you. Give us the name of the others.” Volk says, his phone at the ready to record the names.

“A-anonymous.” He gasps, his eyes pleading. “She’s lying. She was just jealous of not having her mom’s attention.” Spit bubbles in the corners of lips and he spews his filth. I debate takings lying tongue first.

I don’t bother telling him Lyric never told me. She’s moved past it. Found her happiness in our growing family. When she’s ready to share her story, I will be there.

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This dumb-ass-dummy doesn't know he gave himself away when he tried to humiliate her at our betrothal dinner. That night I marked him for death.

"You're already dead." I let a smile play across my face. Seeing his panic almost makes my dick hard.

"Ready?" Tossing the question over my shoulder to Nikko, I keep my eyes on the monster before me as I slip my gloves on. They say you watch closely, you can see the demon in their eyes.

"Yeah."

I clamp the blander. There. His demon rises. I whisper a prayer — for my soul not his as I exact Allah's justice as is my duty.

With precision, I castrate him. I stuff his insignificance into his mouth. "Hold this for me, will you?" Stepping back, I make room for Nikko, who presses the hot poker into the gaping cavity when his dick used to be. His screams fill the space, ricocheting throughout the cavernous space.

The acrid smell of burning flesh washes over me. Instead of my gorge rising, sick satisfaction wraps around me.

"Wake him." Taking the blunt offered, I take a drag.

"Damn." I look over to Oz, passing it back.

“That SA shit is fire. Strongest on the planet, just like my people. Aye, let me know if you want in on distribution,” he says, taking it from me, pulling a long drag before passing it on to Nikko.

“Hell yeah, I’ll have Sadiq to contact you.” I say, taking another drag after it’s passed back, waiting for this chump to wake up.

Taking the blooded blander over to the sink, I wash and rinse it clean.

I don’t hide my smile when I hear his whimpers. Joy rivaling that when I welcomed my daughter into the world spreads me as he starts screaming as I approach him with my fillet knife.

Feeling generous, I toss its mate to Nikko.

“Let’s flay this motherfucker.”

Epilogue

LIVING MY LIFE LIKE IT’S GOLDEN

LYRIC

Hassan seems unusually happy.

He’s singing, “My Love Habibti,” to Antonia. Who knew he had such an amazing baritone?

He was content to let me sing lullabies to Ayaan. Yet, when I woke up to him singing to Antonia after I gave birth.

“You have to sing to Ayaan and Zayn too.” I told him. His voice was heaven. For some reason, I didn’t ask him to sing for me. I don’t know why.

“I will.” He promised his eyes were shining so bright the vulnerability rare and precious. I didn’t push. My prince is not a man to be pushed. He’s a man you allow to work through his shit, trusting that his honor will win out.

Instinctively, I knew that then, just as I know it now.

“What’s got you so happy?” I ask as he puts her in her crib.

“You. Them.” he says, caging me in his strong arms, drawing me into his hard body.

“Come with me.” He tugs me behind him, closing the door with a soft snick behind us.

We’d already put Ayaan and Zayn to bed earlier as our routine now dictates. We have two very clever and rambunctious boys.

I’m so blessed. Everything I ever dreamed has come to true. Being loved and protected by Hassan is more than the stuff of fantasies — it’s a reality I deserve.

We worked through the hard parts and we are still a work in progress. Just like I know his ass is lying about why he’s happy. He did something. Still a villain through and through. I know him better than anyone, maybe even his equally diabolical twin. So, I know that self satisfied chest puffing is only caused by my pussy, our kids our killing some unfortunate.

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I'll let him have it for now. Fi, as usual, will find out from Fariq, then I'll know.

“Wassup?” I ask as he leads me into his home office. Another recent addition. He works from home most days, splitting his days with kingdom business and the needs of our family.

Babba Al Rasheed, aka the king, decided he wasn't ready to step down yet, thinking it was better for a slower transition after the speculation of the Jhori Bin Saladin's disappearance through Moroccan high society sending the deeply entrenched palace interests into an uproar.

For some reason, people associated with Jhori have gone missing. His oldest son, Jhadari, has taken on his father's empire. When we met with the unflappable heir, he seemed to take the disappearance of his father all in stride.

His “oh well” attitude was attributed by Hassan as business. However, I think it has more to do with the mogul pitting his sons against each other.

One thing I know growing up with a monster is they will use anything to exert control over those less powerful than them.

Like recognizes like, and when Jhadari exhibited little or no concern for his father, that told me all I needed to know.

Khadijah, on the other hand, is grieving. Though we know she had nothing to do with the attack, things pointing to the attempted killing of me and Deacon clearly implicate her. Why her father thought to sabotage her in such a way is baffling.

“Here.” Hassan hands me a sheaf of papers.

Tears fill my eyes when I see all my masters, all the way from my first produced work. FADE and I went in fifty-fifty on everything when I first started my career. I never bothered to ask for my master because I trusted him. FADE always had my best interest at heart.

“I’d never even thought?—”

“A belated wedding gift from FADE.” His voice is somber. His eyes meet mine, absolutely guileless.

“He loves me — but ain’t no fucking way he just gave me these masters. Creative Chaos is a business. One he loves.” I meet his unwavering gaze.

“He loves you more. All you ever had to do was ask FADE, but you never have to ask me for anything. All that I have and all that I am is yours.” His words are emphatic, and I believe him.

Every artist dreams of owning their masters. They both knew I would never do it. That’s why Hassan got them for me.

Speechless, I wipe the tears away, looking at the years of my hard work made manifest in my hands.

Straightening the papers, taping them to line up together. I settle them on my lap. Folding my hand on top, I look up into his gaze. “Thank you,” I say, simply pushing the well of emotions down. I feel like I want to explode with joy even as a wild feeling of disquiet squirms inside of me.

Dropping on his hunches, making me meet his gaze. “One thing you’re going to learn about me, songbird, is I’m going to be your safe space. Too long you’ve had to do it

all on your own. Now, you have me and if you let me love you, protect you and be your strength, you will find the ease you deserve. Let me be your strong tower, sparrow.”

I don’t even realize I’m crying. It’s one thing to know what he’s saying is true. It’s another entirely to feel it ripple through my soul with a promise of eternity.

An almost sad little smile quirks his mouth and for a moment, I almost think he knows the secret I still haven’t shared.

“Give me a chance to show my love for you, habibti.” Cupping my face, he presses his firm lips to my brown.

Incandescent joy fills me as I nod, turning my face to his, trusting for the first time in a very long time that I was truly safe, loved and protected.

THE END FOR NOW